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Book Reviews

The Sociology of W.E.B. Du Bois: Racialized Modernity and the Global Color Line

José Itzigsohn and Karida Brown *The Sociology of W.E.B. Du Bois: Racialized Modernity and the Global Color Line*. New York: New York University Press, 2020. 273 pages.

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Introduction

The Sociology of W.E.B. Du Bois: Racialized Modernity and the Global Color Line is a thoroughly researched and expertly written analysis of sociological theory. Together, Itzigsohn and Brown delve into the theoretical foundations of the sociological discipline—namely, the problem of understanding a rapidly industrializing Western Europe and its economic, political, and social effects on the rest of the world. They show us how the founders of sociology—Weber, Marx, and Durkheim—each conceived of modernity differently, yet all lacked a comprehensive analysis of the most preeminent innovation of modernity: race. This review of *The Sociology of W.E.B. Du Bois* focuses on how Du Bois’s theoretical system of modernity—what Itzigsohn and Brown define as racialized modernity—establishes him as the fourth founder of sociology. Du Bois’s theoretical system is based on a conception of modernity defined by colonialism, the invention of race, and the varied experiences of exclusion and oppression these social structures created (Itzigsohn and Brown 2020, 15).

This essay thinks through the past, present, and future of the field of social theory. To think through our sociological past and foundational influences, I analyze Du Bois’s oeuvre to demonstrate how his theory of racialized modernity fills important lacunae in Weberian, Marxian, and Durkheimian theoretical systems. In this way, I add detail to the elegant theoretical analysis Itzigsohn and Brown undertake in *The Sociology of W.E.B. Du Bois*. Then, I discuss how Morris’s *The Scholar Denied* (2017) began the current reevaluation of sociology’s emancipatory potential through a Du Boisian approach.

Finally, I present interviews with current first through seventh-year graduate students at Brown University's Department of Sociology to envision how Du Boisian sociology may influence the future of our discipline. In this section, I embody the Du Boisian methodological tool of reflexivity by engaging with my own experience in reading *The Sociology of W.E.B. Du Bois*. I write about a community of graduate students in which I, too, form part of and my writing style in the section will reflect this community essence.

The Past: Foundations of our Sociological Discipline

In Weber's analysis of modernity in *The Protestant Ethic*, the West represents the epitome of scientific and aesthetic production because of a unique cultural phenomenon with universal significance and value—rationalization. For Weber, rationalization drove the West's development of capitalism through methodical bookkeeping, organized labor, and the separation of business from the household. Although Weber recognized the bifurcation between free and unfree labor, he argued that rationality still underpinned the organization of slave labor on the plantation (Weber 1976, 21). However, he did not explain how the organization of labor on the plantation production machine was constructed, naturalized, and reconfigured on a global scale.

This was an essential question for Du Bois as he developed his theory of racialized modernity. In his phenomenological study titled *The Souls of Black Folk*, he asked, "Why has civilization flourished in Europe, and flickered, flamed, and died in Africa?" (Du Bois 1994 [1904], 162). His theoretical and empirical work answered this question by demonstrating how the West developed a way to inscribe social status and rank on the human body through the social signification of skin color—in other words, the concept of race. For Du Bois, the social construction and naturalization of race was the key "innovation" of the West—not rationalization.

In his autobiography, *The Dusk of Dawn*, Du Bois grappled with how the social construction of race, although intangible, had real impacts on his own life. Furthermore, he used this phenomenological approach to hypothesize race's destructive impacts on the future of humanity, locally and transnationally. He explained, "Because of the modern African slave trade a tremendous economic structure and eventually an industrial revolution had been based upon racial differences between men; and this racial difference had now been rationalized into a difference mainly of skin color" (Du Bois 2006 [1940], 2). This racialization—and its subsequent rationalization—was enduring and became "the problem of the color line" in the twentieth century to the present (Du Bois 1994 [1904], 9).

Du Bois's understanding of racialized modernity elucidates how the development of rationalization and racialization were deeply interlinked and made transnational through coloniality. Coloniality is different from pre-

modern forms of colonial rule because it organized labor through creating, imposing, and naturalizing racial hierarchy, both at home and abroad in its colonial territories (Boatcă 2016, 107). In this way, it permanently changed the international division of labor. By accounting for coloniality, Du Bois's understanding of modernity differs from Marx's. Du Bois explains how the commodification of labor is deeply embedded within global racial hierarchies.

For Marx, the construction of labor as a commodity is a social process that transforms the identity of humans into "workers," who in turn become identifiable in the capitalist system through the price of their labor (1978, 338). However, he did not acknowledge how colonialism permanently reorganized labor relations locally and globally. In Marx's analysis, colonialism was a part of primitive accumulation—a moment in national history that would allow the state to amass resources. After sufficient resources had been accumulated, the state would end its colonial involvement overseas and continue expanding capitalism at home.

For Du Bois, it was not the commodification of labor that was the hallmark of capitalism—it was the commodification of *racialized* labor and its global spread through coloniality. In his analysis of colonialism and capitalism, *The World and Africa*, he explained, "The result of the African slave trade and slavery on the European mind and culture was to degrade the position of labor and the respect for humanity as such" (Du Bois 2014 [1947], 12). Although the slave trade disproportionately affected the African continent, its people, their descendants, and the diaspora—Du Bois argued that this system changed the conceptualization of labor as a whole. For Du Bois, the result of the African slave trade was a devaluation of labor and, more troublingly, of humanity itself.

Marx's egress from this capitalist system was through a unified proletariat revolution, but a flaw in his theory of change was that this revolution never came to fruition. For Marx, the ruling economic class was also the dominant intellectual force, and thus he conceived of ideology as a residual effect of the material basis of society (1978, 173). Du Bois conceded that the ruling class was fundamentally invested in reproducing the racist economic structure that granted them their privileges. However, he argued that part of the ruling class strategy was to use ideology to supersede class interests with racial ones. Du Bois demonstrated through rigorous empirical work that the racialized commodification of labor structured economic, social, and political relations—together working in a way that creates and reproduces an ideology of white supremacy that precludes a unification of the proletariat.

In *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois analyzed historical capitalism and its relationship to racialized labor using the case of the Civil War and its aftermath in the United States. He explained, "But the poor whites and their

leaders could not for a moment contemplate a fight of united white and Black labor against the exploiters” (Du Bois 2014 [1935], 27). Du Bois argued that white immigrants in the Northeast and Midwest blamed free African Americans for the low price of labor and excluded them from labor unions. On the other hand, poor whites in the Southeast worked against their class interests and allied themselves with the planters because they could reap the psychological wage of whiteness—the feeling of power and control over enslaved people, entitlement to full citizenship rights, and to dream of the lifestyle of upper-class whites. This ideology helps us understand how the American proletariat, ensconced within a society founded upon slavery and colonialism, could never achieve Marx’s vision of revolution. Indeed, Du Bois argued that these processes created the color line, an intangible social structure that deeply fragmented society into racialized groups (Itzigsohn and Brown 2020, 218).

Given his thorough research on the divisive effects of the color line, Du Bois was skeptical of assuming that society was a singular, unified social body. For him, this was an empirical question to be investigated. Other social theorists of his time, like Émile Durkheim, based their theories of modernity on the “hasty conjecture” (Du Bois 1898, 10) of a consolidated social body. Durkheim’s theory of anomie, the slow disintegration of society into isolated individualism associated with Western, industrialized cities, has been a foundational concept of sociological theory. However, this idea of disintegration implies that there was a whole in the first place. Former colonial powers and eventual nation-states such as England and France were built upon the fragmentation between “motherland” and colony (Glissant 1992; Hammer 2020), white and nonwhite (Fanon 2008), free and enslaved (James 1989; Williams 1994), citizen and foreigner (Winant 2002) tenuously held together under the social construction of empire. In the case of the United States, African Americans’ economic and social exclusion did not end with the abolition of slavery in 1865.

In *The Philadelphia Negro*, one of the first sociological empirical studies to use statistical data, Du Bois writes, “Here is a large group of people—perhaps forty-five thousand, a city within a city—who do not form an integral part of the larger social group” (1996 [1899], 5). While Durkheim found that anomie was a product of industrialization, Du Bois argued that the particular exclusion African Americans faced as they migrated to Northern cities after the failure of Reconstruction was attributed to the racialization of markets, inadequate training of workers, the weakness of the African American financial sector, and competition from European immigrant labor (Henry and Danns 2020). Du Bois complicates the notion of disintegration from the social whole by arguing that there was never *one* society to begin with. He argued that the racial state, economic markets, and social relations were built upon the social construction of the global color line—the division of

people according to racial classifications (Itzigsohn and Brown 2020, 19). The color line structures institutional power in a way that silences, excludes, and, often, erases people of color.

The Present: Paving the Way for Incorporating Du Bois's Emancipatory Sociology

The erasure of Black scholarship from mainstream sociology as an effect of the color line on knowledge production was the central question for Aldon Morris in his book about W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Scholar Denied* (2017). Morris analyzed autobiographies, letters, and newspapers from the sociological network of intellectuals from the early-to-mid twentieth century to understand why Du Bois's foundational work to the discipline of sociology was not acknowledged by past and contemporary mainstream sociology. He illuminates how the ideology of the color line rendered the reality of the superiority of Black scholarship unthinkable. Subsequently, Morris demonstrated how white mainstream academia implemented systematic formulas of erasure and silencing. In this way, white academic gatekeepers were able to "repress the unthinkable,"—namely, the excellence of Black scholarship—and bring it back to "the realm of accepted discourse"—the mainstream belief in the ignorance of Black people and their contributions to the production of knowledge as nonsense (Trouillot 2015, 72). Morris crafted an intellectual history of erasure that turned our attention to the pervasiveness and power of the color line within academia.

Not only did Morris delineate how power and ideology influence the production of knowledge, but he also prompted us to imagine the state of the sociological discipline had Du Bois's scholarship received due recognition. It is this question that Itzigsohn and Brown center in their book three years later. This one-two punch shook up the sociological discipline. While Morris turned our gaze outward to the inherent history of power and racialization within academia, Itzigsohn and Brown center the discipline's present juncture by opening up the possibility for a Du Boisian sociological approach to current quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods research projects. In their warm embrace of junior scholars, Itzigsohn and Brown simultaneously take us into a not-too-distant future where Du Boisian sociology reinvigorates the discipline by centering critical scholarly practice, reflexivity, and an ethics of cooperation and solidarity (Itzigsohn and Brown 2020, 209–210).

The Future: The Sociology of W.E.B. Du Bois as a "Guiding Beacon"

Personally, this book had so profoundly resonated with me that the idea behind these graduate student interviews was to understand what impact this book had on other graduate students. I set out to interview one student from each cohort at Brown University's Department of Sociology to under-

stand how *The Sociology of W.E.B. Du Bois* impacted beginning and advanced graduate students in different ways. I emailed the sociology graduate student directory, asking for interview participants, and received immediate and enthusiastic replies. Every student interviewed had either taken a class with Dr. Itzigsohn or had him as a member of their dissertation committees, often both. I, too, consider myself a Du Boisian scholar and have selected Dr. Itzigsohn as the chair of my dissertation committee. Many of the students in this essay, then, represent the emerging Du Boisian sociological community at Brown University.

In total, I spoke with seven graduate students (one student from each cohort year) in a semi-structured interview that ranged from thirty minutes to an hour. Archana is a first-year interested in environmental sociology, Gustavo is a second-year interested in bureaucracies and the sociology of law, Subadevan is a third-year currently exploring the sociology of development and the environment, Katie is a fourth-year focused on race, gender, and sexuality, Jocelyn is a fifth-year working on developing the sociology of love, Laura is a sixth-year working on phenomenology and the soundscape, and prabh is a seventh-year cultural sociologist of race and colonialism. I began each interview by asking them to tell me about their research interests in their own words and then their thoughts on the book. I ended the interview by asking them about how they envisioned the future of sociology. In each interview, we connected on the sense of feeling embraced and welcomed as scholars when reading this book. Laura described it as a “guiding beacon” and simultaneously an “invitation, handbook, and encyclopedia.”

“The Communal Meeting Place”: Using this Book Throughout All Stages of Graduate School

Graduate students across all cohort years referred to the usefulness of the book’s glossary, bibliography, and thorough theoretical outlining of Du Bois’s extensive oeuvre. However, the book was used differently depending on whether students were in the early stages of graduate school or more advanced. Those students at the beginning of graduate school have described using this book to answer general questions. It is seen as a grounding, a basis, and guide for thinking through Du Boisian concepts such as the framework of racialized modernity, the global color line, and how to employ Du Boisian methodology on empirical projects. Students beginning their graduate studies agreed that this thorough introduction to Du Boisian sociology changed their way of thinking and their research trajectory.

Gustavo, a second-year, remarked how this was one of the most important readings of his first year. He cited that Du Bois’s deep humanistic concern, justice, resistance, an underlying commitment to liberation exposed him to looking at social patterns in a “completely new light.” Archana, a

first-year, described how she was hesitant to take Dr. Itzigsohn's course on Du Bois, titled the *Souls of Sociology*, because it was a theory class, and she felt she did not have enough of an academic background in social theory to take the course. She reached out to explain why she would drop the class, and Dr. Itzigsohn responded, "I think you should take this class now in the interest of decolonizing sociology." Archana relayed how helpful it was to have been introduced to Du Boisian sociology so early in her career and to have that encouragement to join the course because she now has "a more complete story" about capitalism which includes both race and colonial perspectives. Her introduction to Du Boisian sociology was helpful for "setting the trajectory" for her future scholarship.

This book provided a solid sociological foundation and citable reference for more advanced graduate students that would justify their historical, relational, contextual, and positional approach to their research. Laura described her experience with Du Bois early in her graduate career, "I encountered little bits and pieces at a time, you're sort of like picking up breadcrumbs and savoring every morsel [of Du Boisian theory]." What was helpful about the book for more advanced graduate students is that it systematically brought together Du Bois's theory of racialized modernity into one place—drawing together all those breadcrumbs they had picked up over the years into a coherent and systematic theoretical work that they could then cite to justify their methodological approach. Laura concluded that this book "helped me to stand in my identity as a Du Boisian scholar. What is a Du Boisian sociologist? This [book] helps to answer that question very simply."

Students appreciated how Itzigsohn and Brown left open the range of what Du Boisian racialized modernity could be applied to. This book is used as a "scaffolding" from which students are inspired and will one day write their books on some of the topics covered here and, perhaps, those not yet mentioned. "There are ideas that would take up a whole other book," as Archana noted. This book provides a roadmap for students to take with them to explore their questions about the world. In his own work on South Asia, Subadevan is still thinking about how to apply Du Boisian sociology to locally specific systems of stratification, such as caste, and their larger macro-historical contexts. Learning about Du Boisian sociological concepts and methods added a new perspective to his questions about local and global relationships between development, climate change, and capitalism. In this sense, *The Sociology of W.E.B. Du Bois* was a "bridge" that helped students travel to new terrains or travel across familiar terrains with a new perspective.

For prabh, one of the issues of academia is that "we don't have meeting places for people to go [gather] where they want, we just have highways that go over one another." As prabh explained, this book was a response to those parallel networks of highways. They thought of it as a "communal meeting

place” where students could gather, where the highways of academia could intersect in an interdisciplinary conversation based on a common theoretical framework and language. When I read this book, I had the feeling of being welcomed into a community in which my creativity and “broad” interests could thrive in these interdisciplinary conversations. From this communal meeting place, students felt like we had the support we needed and the invitation to go out and explore the social problems we were interested in.

“Asking Questions That Are Informed Academically”: Du Boisian Methods

Du Bois created a theoretical system of racialized modernity and a sociological method that could be applied to the gamut of social problems on a local and transnational scale. Several graduate students I interviewed applied Du Boisian theory and methods to local and global social problems where race was important but not central such as colonialism, environmentalism, gender, and sexuality. As prabh explained, “Structural doesn’t mean exclusive. If race is a structural element of life, it doesn’t mean other structures don’t affect us.” Du Boisian theory and methods make it possible to analyze various structural problems other than race. Furthermore, prabh continued, “This is what Du Boisian methodology does—it takes our [commonplace] conversations and provides the ideological and conceptual frameworks to translate it in an academic way to transform and relay our experience.”

This book lays out the four Du Boisian methodological pillars of contextualization, relationality, historicity, and the subaltern standpoint. As Katie mentioned, focusing on local context allows us to “ask questions that are informed academically.” Historicity is not just context but a specific historical analysis that shapes the present institution, relationship, or social pattern. Jocelyn said, “It reminds me to fight for the historical piece to not just be a chapter or segment of a chapter to give you context to what is happening now.” This historical analysis is both local and transnational. Du Boisian sociology understands that the local is shaped by broader transnational patterns—in other words, it is relational. One of the quotes that Jocelyn prepared and read out loud to me during our conversation was, “A Du Boisian global sociology is also relational. It looks at peoples and social and cultural formations in their local and global connections” (Itzigsohn and Brown 2020, 95).

As Du Boisian scholars, it is crucial to think deeply about how “the subaltern speak, organize, and resist” (Itzigsohn and Brown 2020, 195). Archana explained how this book helped her understand that “science is not so separate from the people we are ‘studying.’” For Jocelyn, this approach was a reminder that she could not just “talk to those who are helping those around the periphery, but actually those who are themselves on the periphery.”

Regardless of where we were on our graduate school paths, this book reminded us that we study *people*, and it is essential for us, as sociologists, to center their humanity and complexity. This was one of the biggest lessons I took away from Du Boisian sociology, and it transformed my analysis of resistance, social movements, and agency. Gustavo explained how Du Boisian methods changed his methodological thinking, “I’ve been thinking a lot about this question of what it means concretely for research to take the human not only as an object [of study] but as a subject. The idea of a subject, as opposed to an object, as a creator of their own reality, interprets their own reality, that has choices and what this means concretely for research.”

Graduate students understood that practicing Du Boisian sociology was not limited to an analysis of research subjects, but also a thorough analysis of ourselves and our positionality as researchers. They explained how Du Boisian methods ask us to think deeply about how our personal experiences affect our research: what social facts we take for granted, our questions, and how we interact in the field. Katie, who is preparing her dissertation prospectus, asked herself, “How will I be in the field as a Dominican who grew up in New York City? What is my positionality as part of a community, but [simultaneously] outside of it?” Practicing Du Boisian sociology means turning our analytical gaze inward to examine our position within and outside the field.

The other side of this positionality tool is reflexivity—what do we do with the information we have learned about ourselves? How do we change as researchers? As prabh put it, “You can’t center the idea of the academic simply on the academy.” Itzigsohn and Brown effectively communicated that Du Bois was first and foremost committed to the emancipation of Black people. Graduate students understood that through this primary goal, Du Bois transformed sociological theory, methods, and data analysis to create an emancipatory sociology throughout his long career. They were impressed at Du Bois’s reflexivity—his commitment to changing his ideas and methods over time to suit his primary goal of Black emancipation. Archana said, “The way he changed his ideas, I thought, was commendable. You know, I think it’s brave to change your ideas, it’s what you should do, but people don’t do that very often.”

This reflexivity inspired Jocelyn to ask current faculty during a professional development seminar, “What are times that you’ve been wrong, and how did you handle it? How did you publicly handle your change of mind and your change in the way that you look at the world?” Jocelyn chuckled as she remembered the faculty members’ discomfort when they tried to answer this question. Together, we reflected on how reflexivity—specifically in admitting failure and exhibiting vulnerability—may disrupt hierarchies of power within academia.

**“Speaking Across All Levels of Academia”:
Disrupting Hierarchies of Power**

A significant theme throughout the graduate student interviews was how this book disrupted hierarchies of power within our academic milieu. Graduate students—whether early or advanced—felt like this book was talking directly to them. At the same time, it spoke to junior scholars and tenured faculty. As Katie described, the creation of this book was interesting because you have an internationally-renown, tenured faculty member and a junior faculty member speaking—really convincingly—to graduate students. Graduate students noticed how vertical hierarchies of power were flattened and rendered horizontal through the creation of this text.

Laura remembers how Dr. Itzigsohn wrote this book in dialogue with Dr. Brown, who was beginning her first assistant professor position at UCLA, as he taught the course *Souls of Sociology* in the fall of 2018. There were eighteen graduate students in the class, ranging from first-years to sixth-years, who, in conjunction with Itzigsohn and Brown, were “speaking across all levels of academia.” She remembered, “The book was created so conversationally and in relationships. You can feel the imprint of that classroom on the book. It is a great way to feel held as a junior scholar.” Irrespective of their cohort year, graduate students unanimously commented on how they felt welcomed, and they noticed how this book invited their ideas, scholarship, and critiques.

Another student in this class, prabh, remembered, “They [Itzigsohn and Brown] wanted this to be something that created crossroads.” By creating interdisciplinary conversations across the various levels of academia, the authors created a “communal meeting place” where scholars could meet and discuss as equals. As they remembered the conversations outside of class that produced this book, prabh said, “Whenever we had our salons, faculty were invited as well. But we all sat at the same table. It wasn’t like the faculty got to speak first and then the graduate students; it was literally knowledge producers sharing thoughts.” Thus, the book challenged hierarchies of power through its creation as a product of thought with graduate students rather than strictly between tenured faculty and junior faculty. When Itzigsohn and Brown wrote, “And we invite you to imagine a contemporary Du Boisian sociology with us” (2020, 191), we felt their authenticity because we could see how this book was created in conjunction with students like ourselves.

**“Mainstream Sociological Thought Will Never Go Away, But It Will Take
Up Less Space”: Future of the Sociological Discipline**

Graduate students had some big ideas about the future of our discipline. Katie immediately said, “I hope it looks like the cover of the book,” which

she described as a model of inclusivity where people of different races and ethnicities, their linkages, and histories are not only included—but centered—in the analysis. Students envision a discipline that pushes knowledge to become emancipatory and not just to reinforce power structures. As Laura Garbes mentioned, “The future I want hinges upon us continuing to question these foundations [of sociology].” Indeed, Du Boisian sociology was seen as inextricable from a commitment to dismantling systems of oppression.

There is a feeling that this book is a “materialization of work that has been already happening [in our discipline],” as Katie noted. In other words, this book is a “fortification” of efforts, as coined by Jocelyn Bell, by critical scholars such as Aldon Morris, Earl Wright II, Marcus Hunter, Katrina Quisumbing King, Zandria Robinson, Orly Clergé, Tukufu Zuberi, Zine Mubane, Julian Go, Zophia Edwards—to name a few that are working to decolonize the sociological discipline. Laura described this Du Boisian turn in the sociological discipline as a “wave of legitimation” where the discipline posthumously offers scholarly reparations for scholars it has erased from the sociological mainstream such as Du Bois and Stuart Hall. Other graduate students, like Prabh, looked at this book as a dedication to “future scholars denied, in the hopes that you will not be denied.”

Jocelyn surmises that the mainstream sociological thought will never disappear, but it will take up less space as critical Du Boisian scholarship is “fortified” through this text and takes up more space in our discipline. Indeed, students have noticed that younger generations of sociologists have a different relationship with the academy that is more critical. For Prabh, the future of sociology is one where “the terms of contestation are now going to incorporate Du Bois as an insider rather than as an outsider being debated.”

Indeed, Katie thinks that the effects of this book will “keep going because [Du Boisian scholarship] is written down” in this primer that we can keep using to further our research as junior scholars while teaching undergraduates and other graduate students. Laura said, “I want people to feel like I felt in the class *Souls of Sociology*, to have those things [concepts] resonate.” We, as graduate students, understood that the acceptance of Du Bois, his social theory, and methods did not represent a radical transformation of mainstream sociology. What *The Sociology of W.E.B. Du Bois* represented to us was a fortification and expansion of an already existing Du Boisian sociological community that will steadily decolonize sociology and “mobilize” contestation—as Subadevan phrased it—one book at a time, one generation of scholars at a time.

Conclusion

This non-traditional book review was meant to pay homage to Dr. Itzigsohn’s and Dr. Brown’s work on *The Sociology of W.E.B. Du Bois: Racialized Modernity*

and the Global Color Line. Their theoretical analysis, bibliography, and revitalization of Du Bois's work inspired graduate students who were beginning their academic journey and encouraged those who were already engaging in Du Boisian sociology. Previous reviews (Loughran 2021), including Dr. Henry's review featured earlier in this volume, have commented extensively on how this book has contributed to the field of social theory and sociology more broadly. When I thought about what I could possibly add to this conversation, I thought about the ubiquitous presence of graduate students throughout the book. I came to the conclusion that perhaps Dr. Itzigsohn and Dr. Brown would like to know what this book meant to me and other graduate students. I wanted them to understand how this book, and the community it fosters and fortifies, feels like coming home.

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