

Writing Africans Out of the Racial Hierarchy: Anti-African Sentiment in Post-Revolutionary Mexico

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Over the past two decades scholars have examined Mexican racial ideology in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They have paid particular attention to the positivist ideas propagated by Porfirio Diaz's *cientificos* in the late 19th century and the creation of the seemingly nationalist, anti-imperialist concept of *mestizaje* most associated with post-revolutionary scholars in the early to mid 20th century (Castro, Hedrick, and Minna Stern). Most studies focus on the inaccurate, racist portrayal of indigenous people by the Mexican nationalist intellectuals of this era. They often note the influence of U.S. and European scientific racism, particularly Social Darwinism, on Mexicans in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They rarely emphasize the absence of Africans in Mexican intellectuals' discussions of race, however. The absence or near absence of Africans in early- to mid-20th century Mexican discussions of race indicates as much about the attitudes of Mexican scholars as their emphasis on the indigenous past. Likewise, excluding Africans from the Mexican racial narrative was as significant to the creation of Mexican national identity as Mexican scholars' depictions of native peoples. Mexican intellectuals "whitened" the imagined Mexican, simultaneously writing Africans out of Mexico's history while challenging North Atlantic¹ ideas about race and racial supremacy by promoting the mixing of European and indigenous peoples, offering what they believed was a distinct, nationalist vision of the racial hierarchy.

This article concentrates on three Mexican scholars and their discussions of Africans (or, in some cases, lack thereof) in their most significant essays. The first two—Jose Vasconcelos and Manuel Gamio—emerged among Mexico's most important intellectuals of the revolutionary period. The third—Octavio Paz—became Mexico's most influential literary figure a generation later. While he criticized many of the previous generation's ideas, he embraced aspects of Gamio and Vasconcelos's arguments. Moreover, in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, widely considered the definitive work on Mexican character, Paz continued both the trend of integrating indigenous people as

¹ I borrow the term "North Atlantic" from Nancy P. Appelbaum et al (2003) to refer to ideas emanating from the United States and Europe.

a means of ultimately eliminating them, and of “lightening” Mexico’s racial stock by avoiding acknowledging the presence of people of African descent in Mexico’s population and history.

This study consciously focuses on three individuals who at various times in their lives worked for branches of the Mexican government (usually educational) and in some cases even founded government institutions based on their ideas. Despite their anti-imperialist, nationalist mentalities, all three spent periods of time living in the United States, often seeking refuge when their ideas fell out of favor with their own government. Both their experiences in the U.S. and the influence of North Atlantic ideas on their educations are significant for understanding each of these men’s assertions about race, and particularly their decision to render invisible Afro-Mexicans by writing them out of treatises on Mexico’s future. In contrast to the *científicos* who worked during the *Porfiriato*, these 20th century Mexican intellectuals considered themselves nationalists and intended their visions of the Mexican people’s future to counter the white supremacist ideology supported by Social Darwinism and embraced by U.S. intellectuals. Yet in ignoring the historical presence of Africans throughout Mexican history, Mexican intellectuals reified the North Atlantic vision of a racial hierarchy with Anglo-Europeans and Anglo-Americans at the top and Africans and indigenous Americans at the bottom. Many recent scholars have pointed out the racism inherent to the concept of *mestizaje*.² However, these critiques have focused on Mexican intellectuals’ treatment of indigenous people. Emphasizing the exclusion of Africans from the racial narratives underlines the nuances of Mexican racism in the first half of the 20th century. It also suggests how firmly entrenched North Atlantic ideas about race had become in Mexico by the 20th century.

Anti-African Sentiment

The history of Africans in Mexico spans as far back as the history of Europeans there. Africans took part in the conquest of Mexico and were present throughout the colonial period. Often they held significant intermediary roles as overseers, skilled craftsmen, and merchants. Both free and enslaved Africans could be found in colonial Mexico. As the colonial period progressed, Spaniards imported more African slaves to work as unskilled laborers in the semi-tropical sugar-producing regions around Veracruz, Acapulco, and parts of Guerrero and Oaxaca. Because more male than female slaves were imported, interracial unions regularly occurred in the colonial period, particularly between indigenous women and African men. As a result of the decline of slavery combined with racial mixing, by the time of independence only a small portion

² In addition to the authors listed above, see Alan Knight (1990) and Marilyn Grace Miller (2004).

of Mexico's population was considered "black," although a significant portion of the mixed-race population likely had some African heritage (Meyer 164-6).

Prejudice against people of African descent had a long history in Mexico and Latin America in general, but gained new strength in the late 19th century. In the period between 1880 and 1930 an export dominated economy emerged and prevailed throughout Latin America. The regimes that corresponded with the lucrative export economies were responsive to the small population that controlled export money, and no longer had to give lip service to the concerns of common people, especially common people of color, in the way they had during the independence period (Andrews 118). Just as the Latin American elite exported raw materials en masse during this period, it also imported ideas from the North Atlantic countries that justified the subjugation of indigenous and African peoples in new ways. The pseudo-scientific racism in vogue in the United States and Europe came to dominate Latin American thought and policy in the second half of the 19th century. In Mexico positivism, the belief "societies were evolving toward a final stage marked by a scientific outlook" (Trillo 1164), became particularly influential, and paired with pre-existing negative views of indigenous people and people of African descent served to further marginalize these two groups.

In the late 19th century Mexican intellectuals enthusiastically responded to the vogue of scientific racism in Europe and the United States. This treatise, most associated with Herbert Spencer and Social Darwinism, held that Anglo-Saxons dominated the globe, enjoyed the greatest prosperity, and had reached the highest level of technological, scientific, artistic, and philosophical "progress" because they were racially superior. Their very success and global domination was viewed as proof of their biologically determined supremacy. Poorer nations, colonial possessions, and "undeveloped" countries were depicted as weak as a result of their inferior racial makeup. Within this framework a complex racial hierarchy existed with northern and western Europeans at the top, followed by southern and eastern Europeans, West Asians, East and Southeast Asians, Native Americans, and people of African descent (although the exact order of the non-European groups sometimes changed depending on the so-called philosopher/scientist.)

Late 19th century Mexican intellectuals jealously regarded the seemingly homogenous populations of the United States and Europe. They associated their whiteness with modernity, and modernity with economic success and political power, and aspired to imitate the "modernization" and "progress" of these countries by whitening their own populations. Whitening and by extension modernizing their countries required bringing in more Europeans through immigration and diluting any pre-existing indigenous and African blood. Intellectuals across Latin America adopted Social Darwinism and scientific racism as weapons to fight the lagging progress of their nations (Andrews 118). In Mexico these intellectuals were known as *científicos*, and many were employed by the dictator Porfirio Díaz. Díaz's *científicos* blamed Mexico's problems on the supposed inferiority of indigenous people (Dawson 330; Weise 753). Their ideas

became policy during the *Porfiriato* as indigenous people were pushed to the margins of society and in some cases became victims of genocidal policy.

Mexico was not unique in adopting North Atlantic racial ideologies. From the late 19th through the early 20th century intellectuals throughout Latin America wrestled with them. Diaz's *cientificos* were not unusual in accepting and even expanding upon racist Euro-American constructs of race. Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, for example, wrote extensively on what he saw as the lamentable racial makeup of his country, Argentina. He not only complained about indigenous people and Africans, the two groups that he saw as the greatest polluters of the Argentine nation, but also of Argentina's Spanish heritage, which he believed to be inferior to Northern and Western European stock. His ideas tangibly shaped the modern Argentine nation. Under his presidency and those that followed it Argentina was "whitened" through a massive campaign to encourage European immigration and as a result of the Argentine army's near annihilation of the indigenous population during the final conquest of the desert (Helg).

New Treatises on Race in Latin America

With the onset of worldwide economic depression in 1929 the Latin American export-based economies sank, and with them the elitist regimes that emphasized whitening (Andrews 151, 157). Political instability was replaced by the rise of populist regimes, which emphasized the shared class interest of common people regardless of their race (Andrews 157). The racial ideologies proposed by Gamio, Vasconcelos and Paz were not part of a uniquely Mexican phenomenon. They were part of a larger ideological movement in Latin America known as racial democracy that emerged primarily during the 1930s. Accompanying the populist regimes that rose to power and particularly inspired by the nationalism of the revolutions that occurred in Cuba, Brazil, and Mexico, racial democracy attempted to impart the egalitarian ideals influencing politics on society as well. At its core, racial democracy proposed a kind of color blindness. Beyond that, however, it also preached that the diversity of Latin American countries made them stronger rather than weaker. The exact ideologies varied somewhat by country. Brazilian racial democracy emphasized the positive elements of the African population, while in Mexico it focused on the triumphs of indigenous civilizations, for example (Holt xi). Throughout Latin America, however, new racial treatises preached that racial mixing would contribute to a new and superior race.

This attempt to upset North Atlantic racial ideologies occurred somewhat earlier in Mexico than elsewhere because of the political and economic tumult caused by the onset of the Mexican Revolution in 1910. The Mexican Revolution ushered in a new way of thinking about the nation in Mexico, as well as new ways of thinking about what it meant to be Mexican. Within the North Atlantic white supremacist framework,

Mexicans had no hope of arguing for decent standing (let alone supremacy), descended largely from one of the European groups deemed less evolved and two of the groups at the bottom of the hierarchy. Furthermore, attempts at encouraging European immigrants had proven unsuccessful and despite the anti-Indian policies of the *Porfiriato* indigenous and mixed race people continued to comprise the majority of Mexico's population. This realization as well as the nationalism inspired by the Mexican revolution gave birth to a new understanding of who would be included in and embraced by the Mexican nation. Rather than accepting the intellectual musings of their neo-colonial oppressors as the Porfirian positivists had and forever relegating the vast majority of Mexicans--and by extension the nation of Mexico itself--to an inferior position, following the revolution Mexican nationalist intellectuals (in classic anti-colonial fashion) used the tools of the oppressor to liberate themselves. They attempted to turn arguments for Anglo supremacy on their heads by using the same pseudo-science that had allowed Spencer to "prove" Anglo-Saxon supremacy, instead arguing that Mexico's unique racial makeup predetermined the nation's strength (Minna Stern, 190-191).

Other Latin American intellectuals responded to Eurocentric racial pseudo-science in ways that mirrored the Revolutionary and post-revolutionary Mexican intelligentsia. The intellectual leader of the Cuban revolutionary war for independence, Jose Marti, also argued that the mixed race and multi-racial populations of the island offered the possibility for a stronger nation than the United States and European nations. In the mid 20th century, the Brazilian social scientist Gilberto Freyre argued that Brazil's large population of people of African descent suggested a stronger future than the segregated, Anglo-dominated population of the U.S., which he argued would always have a "negro problem" (Graham 166).

The nationalist ideologies of Marti and Freyre had more in common with those of the Mexican intelligentsia than simply responding to a Euro-American racial hierarchy that destined their populations to secondary standing, however. While attempting to invert Euro-American racism, late 19th and early to mid 20th century Latin American intellectuals in general and the Mexican intelligentsia in particular inadvertently reified many of the racist North Atlantic precepts that they sought to counter. The most obvious—and most discussed—manner in which the Mexican intelligentsia did so was to argue for racial mixing as a means of eliminating segregated indigenous populations, who they believed exhibited characteristics of racial inferiority.³ Less obvious but nonetheless significant was their tacit approval of the North Atlantic assertion of African racial inferiority by ignoring African heritage in their own country.

Early to mid 20th century Latin American intellectuals attempted to reject European and U.S. ideas about race in an effort to champion the merits of their own people. But at their base these new racial ideologies were flawed both because they

³ See Minna Stern (190), for example.

relied on the same sort of pseudo-scientific assertions as North Atlantic ideas and because they failed to challenge many essential notions of the North Atlantic ideologies—namely that Asian, African, and indigenous American peoples were racially inferior to Europeans and their descendents. Another major problem with embracing multiculturalism with the caveat that it involve either miscegenation or the assimilation of perceived “problem” groups to mainstream European based beliefs, practices, and lifestyles is that it does not represent genuine tolerance. In the ideology of *mestizaje*, “problem” groups are viewed as having no merit in their own right. While the achievements of their ancient ancestors might be appreciated, in the present they are either only valuable in what they can contribute to a new, superior mixed race group or can only be salvaged through assimilation to mainstream “mixed” culture, which rarely contains any vestiges of their practices and beliefs. In this respect the Mexican nationalist concept of *mestizaje* differed little from the Social Darwinist ideas of the U.S. and Europe: both devalued the practices and supposed racial characteristics of non-European groups in their own right.

Gamio, Vasconcelos and Paz

Jose Vasconcelos Calderon was perhaps the most influential individual in restructuring Mexican education during and following the revolution. Having already distinguished himself as a promising young intellectual during the *Porfiriato*, he broke with positivism in the academy and supported Francisco Madero’s uprising against Diaz (Meyer et al 127). Under Madero’s rule he led structural changes to the *Escuela Preparatoria*. In 1914 he was appointed minister of education, only to be exiled from 1915-1920 under Venustiano Carranza. When he returned to Mexico in 1920 he began a series of significant positions related to education, first directing *Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico* (UNAM), then creating the Ministry of Public Education and serving as the first Secretary of Public Education under Alvaro Obregon.⁴ In that capacity he determined public curriculum, chose new textbooks for Mexico’s pupils, and undertook policies designed to incorporate Mexico’s indigenous citizens into the mestizo mainstream (Meyer 427-29). He published his most well known work, *La Raza C6smica*, at the height of his public service in 1925.⁵

La Raza C6smica was significant not only in shaping popular attitudes about race in Mexico but also in shaping public policy. Vasconcelos intended it to be a nationalist, anti-U.S. treatise that would lead to a stronger, more unified and inclusive Mexican society. Central to the creation of a Mexican national character, according to

⁴ Paz states that Vasconcelos’ influence was “at its strongest...when he became Secretary of Public Education under Alvaro Obregon” (140).

⁵ For more on Vasconcelos, see Luis A. Marentes (2000), Francisco Ju6rez Nicandro (1967), and Kelley Swarthout (2001).

Vasconcelos, was miscegenation. While Spencer and other Social Darwinists held that racial mixing destroyed biological strengths leaving miscegenated individuals with the worst characteristics of each group, Vasconcelos maintained the opposite. Miscegenation would allow for the elimination of the weakest characteristics of each race and the continuation of the stronger traits (Vasconcelos 26, 31, 40). Vasconcelos believed that Latin America could be a place where a new race, which he called the cosmic race, supposedly a mixture of all races, could flourish.

Vasconcelos, for all his contention to the contrary, fell victim to the same Eurocentrism he sought to counter. Although he championed racial mixing, he did so at least partially because he viewed it as a means of eliminating Mexico's "race problem"—indigenous people. Likewise, for all his lip service to the greatness of the indigenous past, Vasconcelos furthered negative stereotypes of indigenous people, referring to them as a pre-historic, "Atlantean" race (Vasconcelos 7-8). From his point of view, for all the great achievements of the "red men," they had gone to "sleep millions of years ago, never to awaken" (Vasconcelos 16). Their only potential retribution would be through mixing with other groups, becoming part of the cosmic race, and by extension, becoming extinct.

Though Vasconcelos saw Africans as one of the "four racial trunks" (Vasconcelos 9), he clearly had little regard for them. He rarely mentioned them, and when he discussed them he positioned racial mixing as a "solution" for their undesirable characteristics. Vasconcelos stated, "In the Ibero-American world, the problem,"—by which he means people of African descent—"does not present itself in such crude terms" (26). Racial mixing, Vasconcelos continued, had already begun to and would soon eliminate the problem of Mexico's "very few Blacks" (26). Furthermore, Vasconcelos associated "blackness" with the undesirable characteristics that would gradually be weeded out through what he called "aesthetic eugenics." He compares the "voluntary extinction" of "Blacks" to the "uglier stocks" that "will give way to the more handsome" (32). In the few other instances when Vasconcelos mentioned Africans he did so deplorably, complaining of the "damnation and irreparable decadence of the Black" (34), and their eagerness "for sensual joy, intoxicated with dances and unbridled lust" (21-22).

Vasconcelos clearly was not ignorant of North Atlantic ideas about African racial characteristics. Having grown up along the Mexican border with Texas, middle-class Vasconcelos was educated on the U.S. side of the border (Valdés-Ugalde 594). Although he envisioned the United States and Mexico as diametrically opposed, he seems to have accepted North Atlantic presumption of African racial inferiority, just as he tacitly accepted many other pseudo-scientific racial notions—the inferiority of Asians, the barbarism of indigenous Americans, and the intellectual supremacy of Europeans. And Vasconcelos maintained his negative view of people of African descent even after experiencing U.S. racism first hand, both in his youth and in the years he lived in exile in the U.S. before authoring *La Raza Cós mica*. Whereas Vasconcelos saw

the “raza cosmica” as a solution for the presence of people of African descent in Mexico, he argued that the United States would always face the “problem” of “Blacks” because of Anglo-American refusal to racially intermix (26, 33). This statement, along with the emphasis on “positive eugenics,” demonstrates that despite Vasconcelos’ attempts to counter North Atlantic denigration of Mexico he could not escape from the legacy of anti-Africanism in Mexican society or the influence of North Atlantic racism.

Vasconcelos’ contemporary, Manuel Gamio, was also significant in shaping revolutionary and post-revolutionary thought about racial nationalism. Unlike Vasconcelos, Gamio’s major treatise on race and nation, *Forjando Patria: Pronacionalismo* (*Forging a Fatherland*), came out in 1916, before he had held any significant government posts. After moving to the U.S. in 1925 and denouncing corruption in the ministry of education, Gamio returned to Mexico in the 1930s and held various government positions, including founding and directing the inter-American Indian Institute. Gamio had trained under anthropologist Franz Boas at Columbia University, and was influenced by the idea that culture, rather than race, shaped a people’s development and characteristics (Tenorio Trillo 1175-1178). Recent studies of early 20th century U.S. social science, such as Henry Yu’s *Thinking Orientals*, have demonstrated that the use of “culture” as a tool for understanding society did not eliminate racism, but actually served to perpetuate it, since “culture” became a convenient substitute for “race” in what was supposed to be a society evolving toward color blindness (Yu). Due at least partially to the Boasian influence, but likely to latent racism as well, Gamio did not advocate literal miscegenation, but instead argued that Mexico’s indigenous people should be culturally miscegenated. Gamio believed that what made an Indian an Indian was his culture, not his phenotype.

Like Vasconcelos, Gamio saw his racial theory, usually referred to as *indigenismo*, as nationalist and contrary to U.S. scientific racism. Yet it had much in common with U.S. and European assertions about racial superiority and inferiority. Gamio was an archeologist, most associated with participating in the early excavation of Teotihuacán and the Templo Mayor. His interest in the great pre-Hispanic sites was not purely archeological, however. The architectural triumphs of pre-Hispanic Mexico also offered Gamio a “great past” to tie to the new Revolutionary Mexican nationalism. He criticized the Porfirian relegation of all things indigenous to barbarism as negative for the Mexican psyche (Gamio 102). But this did not mean that Gamio had a positive view of indigenous people living in the present. On the contrary, he viewed indigenous culture, religious tradition, and language as inferior. At best indigenous people possessed all of the merits and shortcomings of Europeans (Gamio 39). Living indigenous people were worthy of study only for the purpose of achieving *mestizaje* and by extension national unity and modernization, according to Gamio.

While Vasconcelos expressed a clearly pejorative view of people of African descent, Gamio simply refused to address their existence in Mexico. Gamio could not have been ignorant of Mexico’s population of people of African descent, yet he found

them unworthy of mention in his vision of a new fatherland. On the one hand he may not have seen them as a problem equally deserving of attention to indigenous people, possibly because of their significantly smaller number. On the other hand his refusal to address people of African descent suggests that he did not consider them sufficiently positive a force to factor into his image of the new Mexican fatherland. Because of his considerable stay in the United States as an adult in graduate school, Gamio, more so than Vasconcelos, was likely influenced by the U.S. positioning of African Americans at the bottom of the racial hierarchy. Even his “liberal” Boasian education would have done little to dissuade this attitude. Boas, Ruth Benedict, and other Columbia anthropologists of their generation concentrated on racial “others” abroad and occasionally on those they viewed as primitives in their midst (such as Native Americans), but paid little heed to the plight of African Americans. Whatever the exact reason, Gamio’s choice to exclude Africans from his discussion of the future of the Mexican nation underlines the perseverance of U.S. influence on Mexican racial thought in the revolutionary period.

Octavio Paz emerged as the voice of Mexico a generation after Gamio and Vasconcelos. He first experienced the United States in 1943 when he visited on a Guggenheim Fellowship. While firmly committed to literature throughout his life, he regularly held posts in the Mexican government, first as a diplomat to France in 1945, where he wrote his most famous work, *El Laberinto de la Soledad* (*The Labyrinth of Solitude*), which first appeared in print in 1950. In 1962 Mexico made him ambassador to India, but he resigned from government service in 1968 in reaction to the Tlateloco massacre.⁶ As not only a post-revolutionary but also a post-WWII scholar, Paz, more so than Gamio and Vasconcelos, distanced himself from pseudo-scientific discussions of race. Social scientists and policy makers of Paz’s generation often used “ethnicity” as opposed to “race” and attempted to move away from explicitly discussing racial issues, but the ideas about race underlying their arguments changed little from those of the previous generation (Appelbaum 8).

Although he later claimed, “*The Labyrinth of Solitude* was...something very different from an essay on Mexican-ness or a search for our supposed being” (Paz 215), it nonetheless came to be regarded as the definitive work on the Mexican character, both internationally and in Mexico. Much of what he wrote had little to do with race on the surface, and he even stated that what determines a Mexican is not race but rather mentality. Nonetheless, in discussing the historical factors that contributed to the Mexican condition, Paz emphasized the European and indigenous background while virtually ignoring African heritage. While noticeably more critical of the European influence (both racial and intellectual) than Vasconcelos and Gamio, Paz’s vision for a Mexican who had more in common with humankind in general demonstrates Euro-American influence.

⁶ For more on Paz, see Silvia Nora Rosman (2003) and James W. Wilkie (1981).

Moreover, although he expressed appreciation of some elements of the indigenous past, his general view of indigenous people was similar to that of Vasconcelos and Gamio. He acknowledged, “After the discoveries of archaeologists and historians it is no longer possible to refer to these societies as savage or primitive tribes,” but he nonetheless referred to them stereotypically, emphasizing the false history of human sacrifice and referring to the “fascination or horror they inspire in us” (Paz 89). Furthermore, when comparing it to Rome and Byzantium, he remarked on the relatively short lifespan of the Aztec Empire, calling its collapse “pathetic” (94). And in terms of indigenous people in the present, Paz had little regard for them. While he criticized the other intellectuals of the revolution, he embraced Vasconcelos’s dream of a “raza cósmica.” In fact, his only critique of Vasconcelos was that his idea remained more theory than practice—that is, that it did not lead to enough racial mixing.

More than his predecessors, Paz’s choice to write the African out of the Mexican racial body is apparent. Vasconcelos and Gamio circumvented the “problem” of Africans by avoiding acknowledging them in any meaningful manner. Paz refused to recognize *Afro-Mexicans*, but their absence is highlighted by his reference to “other” Africans. He began Chapter 2 by excluding people of African descent—and for that matter, pure-blooded indigenous people—from the category of “Mexican.” He wrote, “The Mexican, whether young or old, criollo or mestizo, general laborer or lawyer...” (29). Creole or mestizo, as though no other category could possibly exist. Yet Paz was clearly aware of an African influence in Mexico, even if he refused to acknowledge the Afro-Mexicans in his present. He discussed people of African descent in two contexts: First, as people who contributed to the category of “Iberian,” and who he usually referred to as “Moorish.” He only referred to this group in passing, mentioning, for example, “Our Spanish-Arabic inheritance” (36), and calling Mexicans, “Castilian and Moorish with Aztec markings” (153). The second group he discussed he called “blacks” or “African Americans,” meaning people of African descent in the U.S. Paz’s discussion of African Americans in the U.S. only came up once in the original volume of *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, and he quite pointedly distinguished them and their experiences from anything Mexican. He wrote, “If it is not possible to identify our character with that of submerged groups, it is also impossible to deny a close relationship... Servants, slaves, and races victimized by an outside power (the North American Negro for example) struggle against a concrete reality...” (72) in contrast to the Mexican, who struggled against himself. In the preface to the 1969 edition, Paz again mentioned people of African descent, but only in the United States. He discussed the Civil Rights movement and the “problem” that the United States faced at the time with “their blacks,” as though Mexico had no blacks of its own (219). Ironically, he made that statement just paragraphs after calling for “a recovery of our (Mexican) true history” (217).

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