

Contact zone dialogue – don't lose the other person

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I lie in bed next to a one-year-old child and ask myself what kind of world this little person will see when he is 30, 50 and 70 years old. Snippets from the news fly through my head: the gap between rich and poor is widening, climate change, water shortages, floods, people fleeing their homes, war, terror. The list goes on. These are bleak scenarios that sometimes seem very far away, yet suddenly seem oppressively close. “Die Muster der Ungleichheit” (Bauer et al. 2023) (“The patterns of inequality” [trans. by M. M.]), an impressive graphic realization of a data collection on income distribution in major German cities in 2023, comes to mind. I search for this study on the internet the next morning. There are illustrations with blue and red dots that form patterns. They reflect sections of German cities in which the difference in household income is large within a few meters of each other. What I find interesting is the clear demarcation between the color red, which stands for low income, and blue, which stands for high income. The pure, rich blue or red patches also attract my particular attention. I take a closer look at Figure 2 under the title “Sharp edges”. It is an excerpt from my hometown of Berlin—and with it the question of which income levels and classes shaped me. A voice inside me repeats the often-heard assertion: “A state primary school is one of the few places where ‘everyone’ can still meet.” This statement, which I distrust, motivates me to investigate further: I locate two neighboring primary schools. One of them is in a deep blue, very affluent catchment area. I see one of many (invisible) lines that sort children according to their parents’ income. Within a district, a city,

within a country, but also between the so-called global North and South, many (in)visible lines could be drawn to mark social differences. As long as catchment areas for primary schools are not defined according to the criterion of the greatest possible diversity in terms of the educational level of the children's homes (to name just one), in reality it is often predominantly children from socializations perceived as their norm who meet, i.e. children of academics meet children of academics, etc. Once again, we see one of these constructed differences.

In the following, I will refer to the consequences of segregation due to social inequalities for democratic processes. I will introduce dialogue-based practice as a possible response to differences and crises. In doing so, I will reveal the specific qualities of artistic dialogues using a teaching example and question the difference in dialogue as an educational potential. An extension of educational theories, which could entail a formulation of a dialogical practice, will be sought. Finally, I will draw on the concept of the contact zone and the reference discipline of inclusion, explore where a dialogue-based theater pedagogical practice could develop beyond the coming together of individual subjects, and investigate what changes this implies within the institution of higher education, teaching and theater pedagogical practice.

Dialogue—democratization process

Social imbalance(s) in connection with a separation through invisible borders represents a danger for democratization processes because

Democratic societies are based on the exchange of conflicting opinions and opposing interests—and the search for compromises. All of this requires not only open and constructive dialogue, but also the open handling of conflicts. Constructive conflict is less of a threat to the community and more of an important element for social cohesion. Strong coexistence requires a good and functioning culture of dialogue and debate [trans. by M.M.] (Wissenschaftsverbund Vierländerregion Bodensee 2022).

However, when societies are organized in such a way that encounters and coexistence often take place predominantly within the familiar, e.g. within a red or blue marked area that is assumed to be the norm, special efforts and initiatives are required to recognize the invisible boundaries and to create and open up spaces in between.

The initiation of programs such as “Social Cohesion” by the “Wissenschaftsverbund Vierländerregion Bodensee” (“Lake Constance Four-Country Region Science Network” [trans. by M. M.]) can be read as a sign of concern for a democratic basis. In these current and future crises, which imply social inequalities and can entail the radicalization of individual positions, theater education can become involved in practice and higher education. This is not with the intention, as postulated in the “Social Context” program, of reaching compromises in dialogue, but to establish dialogue between people in the first place. According to Krenz-Dewe and Mecheril, democracy is not a status quo, but must be permanently established, because “in terms of democratic theory [...] democracy is above all an unfinalisable process [...]” [trans. by M.M.] (Krenz-Dewe/Mecheril 2022: 55) theater education, which claims to be socially relevant, must participate in democratic negotiation processes with its own artistic forms. If the world produces crises in quick succession, theater education must not be allowed to ignore this, but should, in my opinion, lead to the question of what changes. New orientations of content and forms are needed in order to remain capable of acting and, beyond that, to actively shape life together.

Stopover—difference within my biography

At this point, I would like to pause for a moment and answer the question raised at the beginning about the income situation and the class that shaped me. I grew up taking it for granted that I would have butter on my bread and juice in stock every day. I can tell you that I grew up as a child of academic parents. This allows me to categorize myself seamlessly as a member of a class. However, I am not telling a significant part of my story. I also grew up with the knowledge, acquired through sto-

ries, that it is not a matter of course to put butter on your bread every morning, to open a bottle of juice or to be warm in winter. So there is a difference running through my biography that defies classical categorization. To add another ambiguity: I grew up in Germany and grew up being read as German. At the same time, I was confronted with being the one who showed the 'typical' characteristics of a Swiss woman. Later, I lived in Switzerland and was read as German. Perhaps my biographical experiences of difference are also the reason for my interest in dialogue. I am aware that with this contribution I am making a strong case for the category of difference, which could run the risk of reproducing stereotypical attributions and producing exclusions. I would like to think of differences as a changeable scope within a dialogical process and not as a binary organized logic that reduces differences to attributions. Rather, I am interested in difference as a changeable medium within a subject in the dialogue process with other people, beings or artefacts.

Dialogue practice

The term 'dialogue' has been with me for several years. It has taken up residence with me, somehow settled in. I take this article as an opportunity to explore dialogue as a theater pedagogical practice and to question its potential with regard to the exchange of differentiating perceptions and constructed differences that imply disadvantages.

These are imbalances of politically provoked crises that entail individual crises. theater pedagogy as a discipline that is characterized by special expertise in the conception and design of artistic, performative and social settings, frameworks, interventions and occasions seems to me to be particularly suitable for initiating encounters and dialogue. theater pedagogy is also adept at playing between reality and fiction and is capable of shaping and changing reality. In my understanding, theater pedagogical work must not leave the world in its multiple crises outside the door of the auditorium. They belong on the stage and/or theater pedagogical practice should be located with dialogue-based projects in urban space and/or in institutions themselves.

In the following I describe the qualities of artistic, theater pedagogical dialogue processes. By these I mean artistic, performative arrangements/actions/interventions that enable people to come together and participate in something that generates a verbal or non-verbal exchange, the special quality of which is to be sought in the moment of complete togetherness, in which new paths are tried out together and negotiated on a trial basis. Reflecting on the process reveals the realization that perception is subjective, or even a questioning or a change in the interpretation of subjective perception, habits of thought or action.

Verbal dialogue—teaching example

With a teaching example from the Bachelor's degree in theater Education at the Zurich University of the Arts in the module "Perception of Art", I would like to use a practical example to show what I understand by a dense verbal dialogue moment that contains the above-mentioned dialogical quality. To do this, I zoom into the micro-perspective: the students had the task of selecting a picture during an exhibition visit that "speaks to them, touches them, hits them" [trans. by M.M.] (Sturm: 2011: 52f). They were asked to engage in a dialogue about this artistic work with another person whose perception and taste they assumed to be different from their own. The students then recorded the process in writing. Student Daria Thüring vividly describes what changed in her perception of a painting as a result of the dialogue with her grandmother:

She [grandmother of the student] was taking my Bertha [figure in the picture] away. She took my Bertha away from me and gave me another one. [...] I can't see Bertha in my old way anymore. [...] I see her strength as well as her strictness and her pride. [...] First I was sad, really, I was sad that Grandma took her away from me, that dreamy Bertha who is so far away, who is so beautiful but doesn't even know... (Thüring 2020: 2).

Something has happened between the grandmother and her granddaughter. Through the conversation with her grandmother, the student

reflects on the changed interpretation of her perception. This oscillates between an experience of loss and joy at the perception of a new figure, a product somewhere between her own perception and that of her grandmother. According to Waldenfels, this could be interpreted as an experience of foreignness: “Familiar problems take on new contours when the shadows of the foreign fall on them.” [trans. by M.M.] (Waldenfels 2016: 8) The familiar problem here is the student’s own perception, which takes on new facets in the exchange with the grandmother. The student describes a threshold. She still remembers the interpretation of her perception as a figure that she describes as “dreamy Bertha” (Thüring 2020: 2) and now also recognizes other characteristics of the figure in the picture, namely “strength as well as her strictness and her pride” (ibid.). She thus describes a state of ambiguity and ambivalence.

The example shows the quality that can arise in dialogue encounters. The dialogue between two (or more) subjects has the potential to reveal the differentiating perceptions or positions. An intermediate space can open up, a space of play between the subjects in which the differences come into motion with each other, figuratively speaking changing their color, texture, size or volume. This is not static, but changeable, within or in the aftermath of a dialogue-based encounter. The unambiguous either becomes ambiguous or maneuvers into an expanded understanding of an indissoluble ‘as well as’. If ambivalences and ambiguities can be brought forth with and in dialogue practice, then this encounter has changed something. Daria Thüring’s written account, which bears witness to different interpretations of a picture, tells of a conflict between her and her grandmother and also of a conflict within herself. In her written reflections, Daria Thüring wrestles with the contradictory interpretations. According to Hans-Christoph Koller, this articulating conflict should be read as a sign of a transformative educational process,

as those linguistic procedures in which a conflict is witnessed—be it by keeping an already articulated conflict open or by (finding) a new idiom to articulate a previously concealed conflict. Only those transformations could be described as education that do justice to the conflict in the sense mentioned, i.e. that are suitable for keeping an al-

ready articulated conflict open or for helping a previously inarticulable concern to find a voice. [trans. by M.M.] (Koller 2016:159).

For Koller, language as a medium for the articulation of conflict is therefore constitutive for transformational educational processes. As the observation of images has shown, dialogue practice can enable transformational educational processes according to Koller. With a further example, however, I would like to make a suggestion for an extension of educational processes.

Non-verbal dialogue—artistical example

The following example is an excerpt from a multi-year art project by artist Lenz's "Workshop for Change" [trans. by M.M.]. This was based in Berlin Neukölln in Carl-Weder Park from 2003 to 2010. The park was placed on top of the newly built city motorway that divided the neighborhood and remained largely unused by the residents. I don't want to go into the project in detail here but would like to pick out a documented encounter to open up the search for change processes using this practical example. In 2005, Seraphina Lenz publicized the arrival of a white horse named Hannibal in Carl-Weder-Park with a postcard campaign. This horse was to be found in a marked-out area in the park for several weeks. A special dialogue between a local resident, Mr. Hartwig, in his early 60s, and the horse Hannibal can be found in the project documentation (cf. Lenz 2011: 131). The regular attention, the responsibility for the horse's welfare and the exchange of affection brought back childhood memories for Mr. Hartwig. As a child, he had a close relationship with a horse and, as the son of a butcher, was also confronted with the killing of animals at an early age. He describes the actualization of his childhood in the non-verbal exchange with the horse Hannibal as follows:

It was a wonderful feeling to be with a horse again. A lot of memories came back to me at that moment. [...] Images of my childhood flashed before my eyes when I was supposed to lead the little calves or sheep to the slaughterhouse. Sometimes I would go into the barn beforehand and let a calf suck on my finger and stroke it before it was killed. I was always

really upset then, but as a child I couldn't confide in anyone what was going on inside me. [trans. by M.M.] (Lenz 2011: 131)

Psychological concept

Mr. Hartwig's written reflections reveal an intrinsic conflict, which according to Koller is a prerequisite for a transformational educational process: the feeling of attachment to animals and the pain of killing animals, as an unauthorized feeling.

In Mr. Hartwig's reflection, however, I also read a process of change based on perception. Many senses are involved in the dialogue process between Mr. Hartwig and the horse. Smelling, hearing, feeling and seeing are in the foreground and spoken language takes up little space. In the dialogue-based encounter with the horse, Mr. Hartwig's childhood memories are evoked and, years later, actualized in the dialogue with a horse. This process of change based on perception can be linked to the psychological concept of the "present moment" [trans. by M. M.] (cf. Stern 2007). Daniel Stern and the Boston Group researched this concept in therapeutic settings, which describes the processes of change within psychotherapeutic processes. It is about the present moment in perception that can occur in the relationship between therapist and patient. This can be transferred to dialogue-based artistic practice.

As the example of Mr. Hartwig and Hannibal shows, present moments can also occur in a non-verbal dialogue practice. It could be an indication that childhood memories and experiences are actualized in dialogical actions, i.e. memories become present and at the same time a new experience becomes possible. In this case, the difference would be between the two experiences, in this example the dialogue with a horse from childhood and years later with the horse Hannibal from the art project "workshop for change" [trans. by M. M.].

These procedures and practices can be derived from psychologically oriented concepts, such as the concept of change in therapeutic settings, for theater pedagogical artistic dialogue-oriented practice, which would

also have to be developed within the framework of university teaching and training.

Against the backdrop of current and future crises, it seems necessary to me that theater pedagogy, especially in its dialogue-based approach, should include well-founded psychological dimensions as well as people's specific social and cultural backgrounds. Because they shape us and our past and are an intrinsic part of dialogue processes. The demarcation line between red and blue leads to different dispositions for educational processes; here we should create differentiated knowledge and take it into account in our TP practice. For it is the differences between people and within the subject that are to be brought into play in dialogue, in recognition of the constant change of these.

Concept of the contact zone

With the concept of the contact zone presented in the following, I would like to attempt to formulate an extension of the dialogue beyond the dialogizing subjects because political and historical contexts are also narrated in the concept of the contact zone. This seems relevant for crisis contexts. For seemingly subjective narratives are expanded to include their historicity and traces of the past, which co-determine the present, are taken into account in the dialogue process. With the concept of contact zones, narratives are no longer left to individuals; instead, the subjects can be understood as carriers of collective processes. The concept of the "contact zone" was originally developed by literary scholar Mary Louise Pratt in the 1990s to describe transcultural encounters in which the traces of the colonial era still have an impact today: "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today." (Pratt 1991: 34)

The concept can be applied to various spaces in which different forms of social inequality, power relations and discrimination are effective, while at the same time recognizing their historical dimension. In the

concept, the border remains significant as an actual territorial or social line of difference but is expanded in the consideration of a zone:

“border’is often thought of as a one-dimensional, dividing line; in contrast, ‘zone’ includes an area, an atmospheric [sic] network with blurred contours and overlaps. Borders have something unifying per se, because through their existence they construct a local dimension and/or a communicative space in which their overcoming is negotiated. The most important function of borders in this context is therefore the contacts across them.” [trans. by M.M.] (Spieker 2019: 30f)

In the concept of the contact zone, the border is not only seen as something divisive, but also as special spaces of cooperation:

Border regions are spaces of closure and exclusion, they are the focus of political anti-migration campaigns and, where they are permeable or completely lack a material marker, they are also spaces of everyday coexistence in the context of political and nation-state developments. [...] The ‘contact zones’ are thus influenced by political and social demarcations; they are conflict zones full of co-operation, spaces of coming together despite social barriers and exclusions. [trans. by M.M.] (Kleinmann, Peselmann, Spieker: 1991: 14f)

Application of the contact zone concept

How could the concept of the contact zone be applied in practice? The concept of the contact zone is suitable for use as a thinking foil in the process of planning, realizing and reflecting on performative dialogue practice. It could be helpful as an analytical tool when it comes to selecting a territorial location. Zones in which structural differences of inequality are effective can be analyzed and selected as an occasion for dialogical encounters and joint activities. If I go back to the beginning of the article and ask myself where and with whom I would like to realize a project in the red and/or blue marked area, then I would now refer to the concept of the contact zone and neither describe one neighborhood as a problem

neighborhood, nor understand the other as one of privileged residents and in the end probably opt for a project in the red zone, because it is obvious that there are apparently fewer—or different—resources available there. Using the concept of the contact zone as a reference, theater educators and mediators could succeed in critically distancing themselves from their own desires and incorporating the historical significance for seemingly subjective narratives of crises and conflicts. In the example above, the movements between the red and blue zones become interesting. Or the focus would be on initiating something that enables movements and encounters in an in-between. It could be possible to enable other narratives on (historical) narratives characterized by interpretative sovereignty or to recognize the social, hierarchical, historical shadows in seemingly subjective narratives and to formulate their effects on the respective subjects. In the space of the blue and red areas, for example, the question of the influence of the inner-city (and inner-German) Wall or the West German history of the guest workers of the 1950s-1970s could become relevant. The differences in the dialogues would then no longer be understood only as subjective narratives, but the subject would also act as a carrier and mediator of historically based patterns of perception. The past would have to be included in current narratives. The concept of the contact zone could just as well be applied to the creation of social spaces, accompanied by the following question: which categories of difference are revealed when I look through the template of the contact zone? Which social spaces do I try to create through a dialogue format? What kind of intervention is needed that is read and accepted as an invitation to a polyphonic gathering?

University as a contact zone

I see the influence of the concept of contact zones on teaching firstly in a changed view of the institution of the university itself. The university should be defined and scrutinized as a social and possibly also a territorial contact zone. What power relations are evident in the entire staff structure of the university, from the kitchen and cleaning services to the IT department, students and teaching staff, etc.? Formats that invite di-

dialogue could be developed on the basis of dialogue-based practice. Dialogue-based research methods could also be developed to explore social differences and their historical dimensions. Against the backdrop of multiple crises, this seems relevant insofar as universities have to ask themselves to whom they grant internal or explicit access (to study) and which marginalizing structures the universities reproduce. Against the backdrop of current crises, which are also making war events prominent in everyday university life, a dialogue-based practice could create answers with dialogue spaces based on the concept of the contact zone. The central question here would be how universities can be a safe place of education for students whose countries of origin are at war with each other without becoming mute in the process. It seems more necessary than ever for universities to establish a culture of dialogue in which differences are not perceived as something divisive, but can be experienced as something changeable, unstable and fluid in cooperation. As part of theater pedagogy training, the curriculum must be expanded to include a basic knowledge of historical interdependencies and the ability to develop artistic responses to dialogue.

Dialogical practice in connection with inclusion

Finally, I would like to think about dialogue practice in connection with the concept of inclusion in a different direction. The guiding question here is: how does dialogue-based practice change in connection with inclusion? The inclusive approach is also binding for dialogue-based practice, because:

In principle, inclusion is the task that the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities gives the right to participation, to education throughout the course of life, and the structural conditions must then actually ensure that people are allowed to participate as they are, without the children or young people or people having to adapt to the structure, but vice versa. Conditions must be created under which people who are made different by society or who see

themselves differently have the opportunity to realize their potential.
[trans. by M.M.] (Bitiş/Borst, 2022, 08:32-08:54)

In contrast to the criticism of the neoliberal tendencies towards participation (cf. Kup 2017: 30) in theater pedagogical practice and academic higher education, this also results in a mandatory requirement for dialogue-based practice and its educational institutions. From an inclusive perspective, the aim is to change the structures that create differences in such a way that they enable participation. With the following everyday observation, I would like to share what a moment of dialogue within inclusive structures could look like: five horses. Ten children. One child sits on each horse, while one child leads a horse on foot along a stream. On the second last horse, a child sits backwards on the horse and moves his hands and arms in the air. The child on the last horse also moves their arms through the air. Riding forwards and backwards, the two children maintain eye contact and perform the theater exercise “Mirroring”. A non-verbal dialogue. Both are so challenged that the moment demands their full concentration, which is released in shared laughter—and allows me to observe the scene from a distance. I actually want to stop writing here, because “inclusion is when you no longer have to talk about it” [trans. by M.M.] (Bitiş/Borst, 2022, 07:12-07:15). But the image is intended as a metaphor for an inclusive space that enables participation. That is why I add: this scene is a metaphor for an inclusive space that enables children to participate. I add further: this scene is a metaphor for an inclusive space that enables the participation of children with and without disabilities. I amend: the inclusive space enables children to be together in which this is in the foreground and the construct of disability is (temporarily) meaningless. I reduce to the essentials: two children play a game together while riding—within inclusive structures.

The quality of dialogue can be seen in the joint search by taking up and continuing movements, a non-verbal back and forth movement, a non-verbal negotiation process. In the inclusive space, the dialogue process seems to change and a different quality becomes visible. Significantly different from the example of looking at pictures described at the beginning of the lesson is the fact that differences in content do not be-

come a negotiation process in the dialogue. The focus is on the joint process of searching and trying out what is possible for both children. In this way, the inclusive approach shows a proximity to migration education. With his perspective on migration education, Paul Mecheril argues that the focus should not be on differences, but on similarities: “Dualistic views of culture, difference and identity should be opened up.” [trans. by M.M.] (Mecheril 2012: 33. This does not mean that differences in the interpretation of content within inclusive dialogue practice cannot become an object per se, only that they are not reduced to their binary identity categories. Perhaps the shared experience leads to a future change in perception and new options for action, in each case in the majority. Differences that appear as the content of a dialogue-based practice should, as a fluid, multifaceted quality, constantly open up new options for perception and action, crossing and expanding patterns of perception. This would be in line with the migration education perspective, because it is not difference and the construction of difference as such, “but the processes and phenomena of contamination and dissolution of boundaries, of displacement and dislocation that run counter to order come into view” [trans. by M.M.] (Mecheril 2012: 33).

Institutional mission of a dialogue-based practice

I would now like to return to the thought process of inclusion. Mai Anh Boger points out that inclusion not only implies the right to education for people with disabilities, but describes her understanding as follows:

Accordingly, my approach to inclusive education, where it is already a lot about disability and society, but on the other hand, I am also often concerned with bringing together different disciplines that deal with difference and power relations, i.e. working in an interdisciplinary way. [...] On the one hand a very broad concept of inclusion, where it can be about all possible lines of difference and on the other hand a focus on disability. [trans. by M.M.] (Bitiş/Borst, 2022, 03:24-3:42)

Inclusion therefore refers to various forms of differences and power relations, as does the concept of the contact zone, but implies a specific intention: participation in education, while I would characterize the concept of the contact zone as a searching approach. An institutional mandate for dialogue-based practice can be derived from this. This consists of using artistic, dialogue-based practices to initiate inclusive institutional change processes. The experiences of recent years from the graduates of the Master's program in theater Education at the Zurich University of the Arts, under the direction of Mira Sack, can be groundbreaking here. They have shown that institutional change processes are possible through performative dialogue practices. The aim of the Master's degree project is to initiate a process of change in an institution. The aim is not to transform the institution, but to initiate a change process adapted to the educational framework. Based on these experiences, I dare to say that a dialogue-performative practice is suitable for initiating change processes in institutions that explicitly focus on the structures that create difference.

Contact zone dialogue in resonance with crisis dynamics

We must make an effort if we do not want to leave the playing field to global and local crisis dynamics in which differences lead to radical positions of individuals or groups. The danger of social demarcation of individual groups, which harbors the risk of producing discriminatory and hostile attributions, is relevant. The development of a dialogue-based practice could be a possible path for theater pedagogy that helps to negotiate and shape social coexistence and the future. In the dialogue process, it is possible to experience one's own perception of the world and of oneself as contingent. In dialogue, we experience that we can see, hear, speak, feel, think and act differently. As the example of granddaughter and grandmother looking at a picture has shown, it is possible to experience a change in one's own perception and its interpretation through dialogue. Recognizing politically and historically based social inequality on the basis of subjective perception seems particularly necessary in

the current crises. The concept of contact zones would be a possible approach to expanding dialogue practice with its perspective on shifts in differences in subjective perception to include the historical dimension and reference to the world.

The artistic practice and expertise inherent in theater pedagogy offers a profound basis for readjusting social and territorial contact zones in design processes. In the context of dialogue-based practice, familiar forms such as interventions could be reoriented as inviting gestures, in addition to their potential to create disturbances. What interventions in public spaces and within institutions are needed so that people feel invited to enter into dialogue with one another? Dialogue means not losing the other. Temporary dialogue-based interventions should be decoupled from classic theater pedagogical production logics and concepts of presentation. In order to be sustainable, their duration should be orientated towards the circumstances and intention of change.

Establishing a dialogue-based practice of theater pedagogy at art colleges would mean training people in dialogue skills alongside the training of their artistic profession. This includes recognizing differences, enduring them and placing oneself precisely in these areas of tension or creating contact zones within which differences are negotiated. Impulses from psychology could be helpful when it comes to training dialogue skills. In addition, educational theories could be expanded to include the knowledge of change processes from psychology.

From the connection with the field of inclusion, another orientation of dialogue practice can be undertaken. The structures that create difference come into view and the unifying aspects of dialogue come to the fore.

The world that the child will see in adulthood can possibly be surmised, and yet remains uncertain. There will certainly be diverse worlds with multiple life plans and different conditions. Schools and universities should develop dialogue skills and the ability to engage in dialogue in order to create peaceful negotiation processes that transcend all differences.

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