
PAPERS

Knowledge Injustice in the Theological Library

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ABSTRACT: This paper gives an overview of my work with decolonial and postcolonial issues in the theological library based on my 2023 doctoral work for my Doctor of Ministry degree. In it, I assign the roles of keepers, producers and providers of knowledge to theological librarians and examine these roles through a framework from Kwok Pui-lan. I include thoughts and interpretations from a wide range of decolonial and postcolonial thinkers as well as aspects of ritual theory. I also draw from survey work I did of Catholic Theological Union students and theological library directors.

Before I begin this paper, I have two caveats.

First, this paper is based on the Doctor of Ministry Thesis-Project that I had originally proposed in 2020, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the beginning, I wanted to focus exclusively on international students because Catholic Theological Union's enrollment usually runs about 40% students from outside of North America, and my DMin was going to focus on international student use of the library. But as COVID-19 continued, I realized that using that category (international students) excluded another whole group of CTU students, namely immigrants and refugees, or the descendants of immigrants and refugees. Why is this important? Because to understand the students at CTU and how they use the library, I had

to understand the contexts they came from, not just their country of origin. Many of my so-called “American” students grew up in ethnic communities attending church services in a language other than English and using a version of the Bible that wasn’t in English. Some even served as the family translator, bridging the gap between the community of English speakers in the United States and the language or world their families came from in the Majority World. Essentially, they lived in two or more cultures. There were also students who had come from academic disciplines outside of religion, theology, or even the humanities, for whom doing research in a theological library was a mystery. So I broadened my research group to include all students at CTU, who then formed the basis for my study.

Second, I would encourage those who are interested in a much fuller treatment of the topic to read my DMin thesis, “Epistemic Injustice in the Theological Library: A case study of the Paul Bechtold Library at Catholic Theological Union” (Veldheer 2023).

Let’s start with the abstract from my DMin, because I certainly cannot cover everything in the confines of the conference presentation; but the abstract may help you better understand what I was trying to accomplish with my project.

Focusing on the Bechtold Library at CTU, I will explore the extent to which aspects of decoloniality affect the practices of a theological library and its diverse student body. Keeping, producing, and providing knowledge comes with cultural assumptions about what should be kept in a library, the types of knowledge they should help produce and services they should provide. As a member of Western society, the CTU library carries a legacy of colonial thought which has shaped the existing library collection and influences the knowledge produced by library users. Using the work of Kwok Pui-Lan, I will look through decolonial and postcolonial lenses to reveal injustice and inform possible interventions. (Veldheer 2023, iv)

Let’s get practical and ask: so what and where did this come from?

Prior to starting my doctoral work, I spent 25 years watching students navigate the library from my perch behind either the reference desk or the circulation desk. For some, the library seemed like familiar territory, while for others, the library was a wide-eyed, white-knuckle ride through an exotic wilderness. Some students approached me with open enthusiasm for learning and research, while others fearfully approached, often to tell me they had no idea

where to start. Others were intrepid souls who relied on previous experiences to navigate the library space. But what each one had in common was that they came out of different contexts with various cultural assumptions about the library. Often their experiences were vastly different experiences from my own, and the students carried baggage from previous library experiences about what they would find in the library and the services the library would provide. But referring back to my abstract, what makes this *colonial* and what do I mean by *colonial thought*?

Although not intentionally, academic libraries in the U.S. do not always meet the needs of students who may be unfamiliar with the Western educational setting. As Cuiyang Mu, a sciences librarian at the University of New Zealand, points out, “critical to the academic success of international students is their ability to use a research library and its databases. Culture and communication differences make international students uncertain about the subject resources and services available to them in a library. For instance, services such as interlibrary loan, librarian reference-by-appointments, and live online reference are concepts new to international students” (Mu 2006, 49). Extending Mu’s observation of international students, I would argue that many students, not just international students—and even faculty—struggle with understanding library terminology. We who work in theological libraries have our own set of mysterious practices and rituals. Our ability to find lost books and obscure citations borders on magic. Cuiyang Mu’s comments about educational settings in New Zealand have resonance with educational settings in the U.S. Like the other theological libraries I have served in the past, the CTU library has a certain way of operating, from how library books are accessed to the length of time books can leave the library, and even how to use all of the electronic resources available through the library website. At one level, what Cuiyang Mu is referring to picks up on the actions of the library. Yet, Cuiyang Mu also mentions culture. I think whatever cultural differences may be present for students are exacerbated when they encounter library culture.

But what remains untouched in all of this talk about culture is how libraries wrestle with their place in the institutions they serve. ATS devotes an entire standard, namely Standard 6, to the library; and no other part of a theological school is singled out for a separate standard. Standard 6 opens with:

Theological schools are communities of faith and learning grounded in the historical resources of the tradition, the scholarship of the academic disciplines, and the wisdom of communities of practice. Theological libraries are curated collections and instructional centers with librarians guiding research and organizing access to appropriate resources. Libraries and librarians partner with faculty in student learning and formation to serve schools' educational missions and to equip students to be effective and ethical users of information resources. (ATS 2020, 10)

Then before looking at any other issue related to the library, Standard 6 takes up the Purpose and Role of the Library (6.1, 6.2), requiring a clear mission statement for the library similar to the mission statement for the school, and also that the administrators and stakeholders of a school understand the library as a “central academic resource that enhances the school’s educational programs” (ATS 2020, 10). But the question for me remains: although the standards of accreditation are clearly written about what the library is supposed to do, what is the reality? How is CTU library contributing to student learning and formation?

In 1960, a special issue of the journal *Library Trends* was subtitled “Current Trends in Theological Librarianship.” A conclusion about the special issue was drawn about theological libraries by Decherd Turner, who was then at the Bridwell Library of Southern Methodist University:

Theological libraries are indelibly tied to theological education. Analysis and judgment in every paper in this issue springs from the ever-present question: ‘What is the content, structure, and purpose of theological education?’ So sensitive to this foundation have been the contributors that no portion of the picture could be developed without some expression concerning the nature of theological education (Turner 1960, 281).

But theological libraries as an entity don’t run themselves. Rather, libraries like the one at CTU start with the librarians. Timothy Lincoln of Austin Presbyterian Seminary writes in his 2004 essay titled, “What’s A Seminary Library For”: “Theological libraries matter because patrons need skilled specialists to assist them in minding pertinent information” (Lincoln 2004, 4). Lincoln’s essay covers much ground furthering Turner’s conclusion that theological libraries make substantial contributions to the educational missions of the schools that they serve. This may be a reason why ATS gives the library a separate standard equal to the academic degree programs.

So let's put the CTU library in context. The CTU library is located within the Catholic Theological Union located in Chicago. CTU, by its own diversity statement,

Reaffirms its commitments to being an inclusive community that draws on diversity as a source of learning and understanding. We believe that diverse students, faculty, staff and curricular offerings are essential for fostering inclusion and engagement and play vital roles in nurturing a welcome climate for all. (CTU 2020)

The diversity statement is aspirational in nature but speaks to the need for the CTU library to serve that diverse population. Yet the fact remains, CTU and by extension the CTU library are also situated in the setting of the United States and formed within the educational culture of the USA. This is an inescapable fact and brings with it certain assumptions. In the US, colleges, universities, and graduate schools like CTU espouse what is commonly known as a "Western worldview." The "Western worldview" is loosely defined by John Hobson, a professor of politics and international relations at the University of Sheffield, as "a worldview that is centered on Western civilization or a biased view that favors it [Western civilization] over non-western civilizations. When the term is applied to history, it may be used in reference to an apologetic stance towards European colonialism and other forms of imperialism" (Hobson 2012, 185). The influence and legacy of this view still exists in higher education in the United States and is also known as colonialism. In commenting on coloniality, Argentinian Walter Mignolo writes,

"But no matter what it is called, the west was, and still is, the only geo-historical location that is both part of the classification of the world, and the only perspective that has the privilege of possessing dominant categories of thoughts from which and where the rest of the world can be described, classified, understood, and improved." (Mignolo 2005, 36)

Indian Biblical scholar R.S. Sugirtharajah writes, "Colonialism is not simply a system of economic and military control, but a systematic cultural penetration and domination" (Sugirtharajah 1995, 460). Some scholars draw distinctions referring to colonialism in the past tense as something that happened as European explorers brought their culture to other places. Sugirtharajah implies that coloniality refers to colonial situations in the present day drawing on Mignolo's words. For the purposes my thesis-project I assumed that both

colonialism and coloniality are still active and relevant terms to use when discussing the theological library. And despite wanting to be diverse and inclusive, CTU was founded and is still geo-historically located in the West, specifically the U.S.

One of the services of the theological library as described in Standard 6 is to enhance student learning in the classroom. Latino theologian and former CTU Academic Dean Gary Riebe-Estrella observes:

Few of us would challenge that in too many of our classrooms the learning/teaching style privileges the values of the Western Enlightenment (a term that contains in itself a value judgement on persons and things non-Western; that is, they are not enlightened) such as the prizing of the individual over the group, individual creativity and initiative over interdependence and collaboration, rational thought over emotional response, writing over orality, the universal over the particular. In these cases, as with the culture of our schools, the classroom structures and procedures that embody these values appear to the dominant group to be both normal and normative. Accommodations are seen as concessions. And rarely does this underlying value system and its historical and cultural contextuality come up for faculty discussion and critique, understandably, though wrongly, so. For it is the value system that produced the educational system in which most faculty have been trained and which has shaped their understanding and practice of education. That is, it is the value system that undergirds their self-understood identity. To challenge the worldview is not only to introduce change but to threaten the fundamental stability of the educational enterprise of which faculty see themselves as the center—a challenge that will sometimes be met with some technical, though rarely adaptive, change and which almost always meets with stiff resistance. (Riebe-Estrella 2009, 23)

While I have heard conversations about adapting teaching styles and revamping curriculum to improve learning at CTU, I have never heard a conversation either at or outside of a faculty meeting that directly addresses coloniality. Likewise, based on the required and recommended reading lists each semester, the books do not directly address coloniality either. This observation about the classroom from Riebe-Estrella holds true for the library as well, in my opinion, and again echoes Turner's comment. Within an institution, academic libraries are a vital component, serving two essential roles: supporting the curriculum and assisting faculty and student research. Applying Riebe-Estrella's comments on the classroom to the library, it is not difficult to draw out this fact that the very activities of the library favor the same privileges of Hobson's "Western worldview."

Because academic libraries do not operate in a vacuum, they mirror the institutions they serve, which is not necessarily intentional on the part of the library, but something that remains unchallenged.

Thinking about this from a slightly different perspective, Michel Andraos, Dean of the Faculty of Theology at St. Paul University, raises two timely and interesting questions: “How do we do theological education that takes both the issues of diversity and coloniality seriously in the globalized seminaries and divinity schools of North America?” and “How do we make our educational institutions as a whole, a learning and teaching environment that is aware of, respectful, and hospitable to cultural and racial diversity?” (Andraos 2012, 4). I think these two questions challenge the theological library to look into how the library privileges its place in the academic community and is impacted by the values of the Western Enlightenment. If we are going to take coloniality seriously as Andraos suggests, then we also need to understand a bit about the subtle differences between decolonial and postcolonial.

At this point it is important to lay down my understanding of the terms decolonial and postcolonial, because these terms were key dialog partners in my understanding of how the library does knowledge injustice, even unintentionally. Although there were many definitions to choose from, I used the work of Claudio Carvalhaes. Introducing the book *Liturgy in Postcolonial Perspectives*, the editor Carvalhaes observes:

While both postcolonialism and decolonialism have important theoretical differences and some authors will like to use one term over the other, in this book the two terms are used interchangeably and so will be assumed to be synonymous throughout the book. They are modes of analysis in which social, cultural, religious, gendered, sexual, and economic ways of living are assessed critically by those who have been victimized by patterns of structural domination and have been dismissed from the historical processes of life creation: namely, the poor, the disenfranchised, the subaltern, the wretched of the earth, and the colonized. (Carvalhaes 2015, 17)

Carvalhaes, a Brazilian who teaches at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, adds a footnote to his observation. He writes,

“In very broad and short strokes, one can say that postcolonialism emerges from experiences in the Middle East and Asia, is a critique to Orientalism and has been deeply influenced by Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha. Decolonialism, on the other hand, arises from experiences in

Latin America and the Caribbean, is a critique against Occidentalism and its leading figures have been Anibal Quijano, Enrique Dussel, and Walter Mignolo" (Carvalhaes 2015, 17).

While there is always a need to pay attention to language and how we speak about something, I think there needs to be some patience with the use of terms like decolonial and postcolonial. My goal is not to develop a common vocabulary or enforce theoretical differences, but let the voices speak for themselves.

Thus the gist of what I was trying to do in my thesis-project was to explore how aspects of decoloniality and postcoloniality had an effect on the practices of my theological library, so I could better serve the research needs of diverse students, including both international students who are new to Western modes of education, and those students—both international and US-born—who have previous educational experience in the U.S. Because postcolonial theory and decolonial theory share many of the same concerns, though from different contexts, I wanted to put them in conversation to propose steps a library can use to start a process of dismantling current colonial practices that might inhibit students from effectively undertaking library research.

But where was I going to find a methodology to explore decoloniality and postcoloniality in the library? My colleague Carmen Nanko-Fernandez stated in the opening paragraphs of her article "Held Hostage by Method? Interrupting Pedagogical Assumptions Latinamente":

Did you ever wonder where theological educators come from? What networks of multiple-belongings intersect to form and inform those who articulate, in the vernacular of their place, the mystery of God and all it implies for our relationships with the divine and the whole of creation? Do you wish there were an efficient survey tool to assess your location on the theological spectrum? So who is mapping the coordinates of contemporary theologizing, and why does it seem that only some of us bear an obligation to socially locate—especially to locate as Other? What are the jarring implications of taking seriously transnational and intercultural compositions of our churches, classrooms, and scholarly academies? Or is the "new normal" disturbingly pointing to the establishment of new norms emanating from positions of dominance that are seeking to control the inevitable and uncontrollable? (Nanko-Fernandez 2013, 35)

I decided to adapt the work of Asian feminist theologian Kwok Pui-lan for my methodology and apply it to the library in the mode of what Kwok calls *postcolonial imagination*. In the introduction to her book *Postcolonial Imagination & Feminist Theology*, Kwok lays down this challenge: “Even progressive theologians in the United States—feminist, liberationist, and racial minorities among them—who have championed the use of critical categories such as gender, class, and race in their works, have not sufficiently addressed theology’s collusion with colonialism in their theoretical frameworks” (Kwok 2005, 7). Drawing on her own intellectual history, Kwok proposes “three distinct and yet overlapping modes of postcolonial imagination: historical, dialogical, and diasporic” (Kwok 2005, 22). For Kwok these modes “make a critical contribution to unpacking the process of ‘decolonizing the mind’. It illustrates the complexities of identity formation of a postcolonial feminist theologian and how the experiences of the colonized, the exiled, the immigrant, and the diasporic raise new questions for and broaden the horizon of feminist theology” (Kwok 2005, 22). I used the modes as a dialogue partner to further the thesis statement’s goal of looking through decolonial and postcolonial lenses. Kwok’s postcolonial imagination refers to “a desire, a determination, and a process of disengagement from the whole colonial syndrome, which takes many forms and guises” (Kwok 2005, 2). Kwok adds more nuance to her understanding of the three modes when she writes, “As I reflect on my own thinking process as an Asian postcolonial feminist theologian, I discern three critical movements which are not linear but overlapped and interwoven in intricate ways. They are more like motifs in a sonata, sometimes recurrent, sometimes disjointed, with one motif dominating at one moment, and another resurfacing at another point” (Kwok 2005, 31).

Each of the first three chapters of my DMin take up one of Kwok’s critical movements, beginning with historical imagination. To understand the history of my students, I did research with current library users and theological library directors, asking them to reflect on their experiences. It led to two surveys and some data.

- The first survey gathered data from current CTU students, who presumably come to the library.
- A second survey sought to understand the current practices of theological librarians who are members of Atla. This survey was completed by library

directors.

- The third source of data is from the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) using the results of the Graduating Student Questionnaire (GSQ) for CTU.

I drew heavily on my own research data for the dialogue with historical imagination since using the GSQ data didn't really tell me anything about how the students used the library. Rather the GSQ data just told me more about whether they liked the library or not. The totality of the research data from my surveys highlighted in some ways how little students knew about library resources and how many assumptions library directors made about the students using their libraries. Although the research data revealed some alignment between the students and the librarians, let's look at two instances where there wasn't.

One area of divergence was how students preferred to learn about library services and resources versus how librarians provided instruction for students. There was agreement between both groups about online tutorials, but a wide separation around student appointments with the librarian. Students didn't rank appointments with a librarian highly, whereas librarians listed appointments as their primary way of doing instruction. There may have been some ambiguity or confusion in understanding what I meant by appointments, but the responses made me wonder what the barriers for students might be in making an appointment with a librarian. On the other hand, there was alignment between the two groups around instruction from the librarian for individuals or small groups. The survey didn't ask specifically how the students came to the librarian for help, which is something that needs to be explored further in future work. Given the range of librarians answering the question while all the students came from the same school, I can see where the differences lie to some extent because each library director has a different student body. But I also wondered if the librarians are asking the students what they want instead of making assumptions about what students need? It was also hard to pin down the ways students learn about a library since this research was done in 2021 during COVID-19 and many students weren't coming into the library physically. This may have also affected how the librarians answered the question from their perspective. Librarians need to do a great

deal more research on who uses their library and how those users come to know about the library beyond just how to use the library.

A second area of data to consider was the response to a question about when students want to learn about the library, versus when librarians think is the ideal time to teach students about library resources. It should be noted that there might be semantic differences in the way the original question was asked that led to deeper differences in the responses, but the contrast in responses was rather stark, with almost 82% of the students wanting to learn about the library at the beginning of the semester, while only 26% of the library directors thought instruction at the beginning of the semester was important. Taking seriously the questions raised by Michel Andraos mentioned earlier, I don't think the difference necessarily infers any intentional colonial intent on the part of the library directors, but rather, has anyone asked students what their preferences are? I know that never crossed my mind when I was actively doing library instruction. There is much more data to interpret, and I encourage you to read chapter one of the DMin to understand the rest of the questions I asked. For now, let's move on to looking at the library.

The second of Kwok's critical movements is dialogical imagination. I used this to have a dialog about how librarians do their work. Keeping, producing, and providing knowledge were the three essential roles I devised for librarians, but each comes with cultural assumptions about what should be kept in a library—the types of knowledge the library should help produce and the services the library should provide (Veldheer 2023, 29). A 2021 marketing report was released that listed the top ten academic publishers (Simba 2021).

- Cambridge University Press*
- Cengage Research
- EBSCO Publishing*
- Elsevier
- Informa
- John Wiley & Sons*
- Oxford University Press*
- ProQuest*
- SAGE Publications, Inc.*
- Springer Nation

The six publishers marked with an asterisk are those I buy from routinely and use their electronic products extensively. All of these are headquartered in either Western Europe or North America. What does this list say about the resources we make available to our students and faculty and the potential creep of colonialism, both in the structure of the databases and the overall content? Similarly, the American Academy of Religion lists on their website that they have a partnership with Oxford University Press to produce “quality scholarship” and provides a thirty percent discount on these book titles to AAR members (AAR 2023).

It remains unknown how AAR defines quality scholarship, but the partnership with Oxford isn’t surprising, and highlights Mignolo’s observation from above about the reach of the West. This reach extends even to the journal titles held by my library. Although representing a much larger number of publishers from the Global South, the almost 250 journal subscriptions and standing orders received annually by the CTU library are managed through an arrangement between the library and EBSCO Information Services, a company based in the U.S. Why does the CTU library use EBSCO? Because EBSCO simplifies the journals management process by working with each of the publishers, and no matter where the journals are published, the CTU library can pay the invoices in U.S. dollars, rather than struggle with currency conversions. A library the size of the CTU library, with a staff of three librarians, could not offer the depth and breadth of journals and other resources that it does, given how time-intensive it is to individually track journal and book publishers, without the help of vendors like EBSCO. My question remains: if Atla members are so dependent on mostly Western—and by extension colonial—providers for the material they supply to their libraries, then how can we expect students from different cultures to interact with this material? I don’t have an answer other than to admit it is much easier to work with information providers who speak my language and work in my currency than it is to deal with publishers who don’t.

Although Kwok’s postcolonial imagination was always underlying my work, as a methodology, it wasn’t always a good fit. But as I was reminded by my faculty colleagues, when you are working on something new, everything doesn’t always work the way you want it to. In thinking further about where my library gets resources, I was

taken with this observation from Kwok because I think it gets at the issue of who is producing the knowledge we keep in our libraries:

The primary issue concerns the subject who is doing the “dialogical imagining.” The subject I had in mind then was very influenced by the construction of the Western liberal subject, unrestrained by social and historical location, free to create, to think, to mold consciousness, such that he or she can shape disparate parts into the “whole.” (Kwok 2002, 66)

I am not sure I ever found the Western liberal subject, but I am fairly confident I won't find it looking only in library resources published and produced in the North American context.

Shifting to seeing librarians as providers of knowledge, this rather lengthy quote from my thesis distills how I tried to make sense of what we as librarians do every day in the library. To understand how we were providers of knowledge, I drew on ritual theory, particularly because it is these very rituals that provide the structure for how we run the library. As librarians, where would we be without our circulation policies and our cataloging rules? Could we deal with the chaos that might come from developing a more user-friendly system than Dewey Decimal or Library of Congress? Can we all agree to shelve the journals in alphabetical order?

Behind the scenes, there are systems and principles, rituals if you will, that govern how library activities are supposed to operate. Checking out and renewing books, getting materials via IShare from other libraries in Illinois, logging into online resources, using other libraries outside of CTU, navigating the library website, interlibrary loans, course reserves, book loan periods, and handling overdue books, are just some of the systems the CTU library has in place along with the principles which govern how these systems work. These systems and principles cover more than just the print materials. E-books also may come with loan periods or other restrictions as well. These are common library activities that students engage with every day and they take on a ritual aspect much like religious rituals in being repetitive and patterned behaviors which as providers of knowledge, librarians rely on to literally provide the knowledge. Without these systems and rituals, books wouldn't circulate, electronic resources couldn't be used outside of the library and the operations of the library would fall into chaos. (Veldheer 2023, 102–103)

Dialoging with Kwok as a postcolonial theologian is a clarion call for librarians, as keepers, producers and providers of information, to consider and reconsider where we get our library resources and

how we interact with those whom our libraries serve. There is always more work to do in this regard.

Using Kwok's approach with diasporic imagination, how do we move forward to start the work of addressing colonialism as it exists in our libraries. Working with my existing framework of librarians as keepers, producers and providers of information, I looked at the work of Indigenous Peoples in Canada particularly around the creation of their own libraries, such as the one at the University of British Columbia that some of us learned about during the Atla conference in Vancouver, held in 2019. I think the ways in which the First Nations people have developed organizational schemes for their collections is worth a much deeper look. They have created systems using indigenous languages and cultures to keep their information and not just in an archival sense. Having libraries organized around indigenous ideals centers the knowledge in ways culturally sensitive and familiar to First Nations people. For producers of knowledge, I suggest we look at participatory research that allows students to participate in producing knowledge using research methods from the contexts of our students, instead of always relying on Western models. For this I drew on the work of Debra Luna and her work with Paulo Freire's 1970 observation on the "culture of silence." In working with Mexican immigrant families, Luna's research involved trying to determine why some students succeed or don't succeed in American schooling, concluding that what was really lacking was the perspective of the very group most affected: the students (Luna 2002, 8). Luna proposed a model of participatory research based on transformative dialogue, which she believes is more than a methodology. Luna's research echoes in Kwok's writing about diasporic imagination and her experiences of being de-centered and multi-centered. There is still a great deal to explore and to work out in how other cultures might do research, which will drastically change how librarians approach research as well.

Finally, as providers of knowledge, we need to give students voice in the research process. Drawing from the work of Gayatri Spivak's writing on the subaltern, "It seems to me that finding the subaltern is not so hard, but actually entering into a responsibility structure with the subaltern, with responses flowing both ways: learning to learn without this quick-fix frenzy of doing good with an implicit assumption of cultural supremacy which is legitimized by

unexamined romanticization, that's the hard part"(Spivak 1996, 293). I have been pondering Spivak's observation in the library context, namely that when students come into the library seeking help, the expectation on the part of the librarian is that the student has the agency to speak for themselves. But I have come to believe this is not the correct assumption. No matter what, there will always be a different power dynamic between the librarian and the student even if the librarian is trying not to make assumptions about the student. I think we need to find ways to set aside some of the assumptions we might be making about what students want and let them speak for themselves in the research process.

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