

Rereadings and Literacy: How Students’ Second Readings Might Open Third Spaces

Talking with students about whether they have completed assigned readings can be uncomfortable, but it can also add trust and dialogue to the classroom culture.

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The snow fell from ashen clouds onto Manhattan’s black streets. The windows of my classroom were wide open, however, as the radiators spewed out wet heat. My students and I had tried to stack magazines over the vents to keep some of the fuggy air from escaping into the room. In an attempt to distract us from the hissing steam pipes, I played music on my stereo. I’ve become most fond of playing Bach’s fugues in the classroom. Fugues not only help to drown out the hiss of wild heating systems, but also serve as a metaphor for a lesson in teaching reading.

“Reading Book Two”: Rob’s Feud and Bach’s Fugue

The homework assignment was on the board, its dry-erase marker fumes wafting about the room. A student named Rob raised his hand. (All names of students in this article are pseudonyms.)

“What do you mean, Mr. Lynch, by *read* Book Two of *The Iliad*?” He used his lanky fingers to emphasize the questionable word, *read*. “Couldn’t I just open the book and read the words ‘Book Two’ and have technically completed the assignment?” Others laughed.

Rob smiled victoriously. The look on his face was one of youthful excitement at having discovered a loophole. A few years ago I might have dismissed his question as adolescent silliness, a fruitless attempt to get around homework. But this was my second year with these students as I had taught them in ninth grade, too.

“What do you think I mean by *read*, Rob?”

He had prepared his answer. “Well, if we don’t have questions to answer and you don’t say anything else, I assume you mean that my eyes need to look at the words *book* and *two*.”

“When you have had reading assignments in past English classes, what did you do?” I asked.

Rob looked up in the air in an effort to access his memories. He began to look around the room and recounted, “When I was in sixth grade, *read* meant

I would go home, lock my bedroom door, and read the book.”

My face began to twist into some shape indicating that his last words proved my point. Our semantic squabble had subsided—that is, until he added, “But that’s when I liked to read. I haven’t read since eighth grade.”

My literary heart sank.

I imagine our “reading” conversation taking place to Bach’s fugue *Contrapunctus 1* (Fretwork, 2001)—the snow descending outside the window; the steam rising inside. The piece is written in four parts: First Violin, Second Violin, Cello, and Viola. The First Violin begins with a long smooth note that jumps up briefly before it falls like a snowflake into darkness. Then, in three calculated and defiant moves, the motif steps back up, rising just beyond its opening note. This last note creates tension in the listener’s ear. But before the First Violin continues, the Second Violin enters and repeats the First’s previous motif. It, too, bows long and smooth, only in a higher register. The First Violin dances freely as the Second draws the opening motif to another near-close. Then the Cello takes it up, resurrecting the musical phrase the listener now recalls fondly. When it is done, the Viola bellows out the motif like a powerful memory. The motif never quite disappears throughout the entire piece. It is always there, like a snowflake you might try to follow with your eyes and, though you lose sight of it, you know it continues to swirl and fall in the wind. It makes me wonder what it would be like to teach literature like snowflakes fall or fugues play. Fugues are not only musical or even metaphorical but also pedagogical.

Back in a Fuggy Classroom

“But that’s when I liked to read. I haven’t read since eighth grade,” Rob said.

I had to ask my students more about this confession. “How many of you actually read when I assign reading?” I inquired, though it was a hard question to ask.

As I looked around the room, I saw a mix of faces. Some were those of students who felt liberated, as if I had validated their hundreds of disregarded reading assignments over the years. Others were uncomfortable faces, unsure of where to look and what to do. These faces focused on some fixed point, usually the desktops.

Another set of faces looked ashamed; these faces included some of my “strongest” students. I hadn’t expected shame in response to my genuine, honest question.

Deep down, I wanted my students to enjoy reading. I didn’t want games, like reading quizzes that students cram for to pass. I wanted sincere readership. I didn’t want us to lie to one another. A majority of my students detested reading and had just admitted it to me. Before we continued “reading” and discussing and writing about literature, we had to talk about where the joy of reading had gone.

I asked them, “How can we reclaim the joy of reading?”

It was with this question that we began a new study, which required a new model of writing to share with the class.

Fugal Readings

While teaching high school English during the day, I had been assisting a colleague and friend who instructs in a graduate education program at night. The graduate students were exploring the use of subgenres in the teaching of writing. We had been reading a collection of essays edited by Anne Fadiman (2005) called *Rereadings*. When she was editor of *The American Scholar*, Fadiman had begun a recurring piece in the journal called *Rereadings*. Rather than simply asking writers to review new literary works that came out, writers reread texts and reviewed their own lives as they narrated their rereading experiences. Rather than writing about a new literary work, *Rereadings* breaks with linearity and returns to previous reading experiences.

A look at some excerpts from the book *Rereadings* (Fadiman, 2005) provides a feel for the subgenre. In his essay called “Marginal Notes on the Inner Lives of People With Cluttered Apartments in the East Seventies,” David Samuels (2005) begins his rereading of J.D. Salinger’s *Franny and Zooey* with a reflection about what it means to be a reader:

No one becomes a reader except in answer to some baffling inner necessity, of the kind that leads people to turn cartwheels outside the 7-Eleven, jump headlong through a plate-glass window, join the circus, or buy a low-end foreign car when the nearest appropriate auto-repair shop is fifty miles away. (p. 3)

As he continues, Samuels (2005) describes the circumstances of his life when he read the book in the past. He mentions memories regarding the plot, characters, and even symbolic moments from the book. As a rereader, Samuels also takes time along the way to reflect on the original reading:

Between the ages of fourteen and twenty-four I read *Franny and Zooey* from cover to cover at least five times. I underlined passages and made cryptic notations in the margins, hoping to become a better person (witty, literate, living in Manhattan), an acceptable character free from the bipolar alternation of uncontrolled aggression and sad passivity that I saw in my parents' marriage and was only beginning to recognize in myself. (p. 7)

This reflection of who one was and is as a reader and person is of such profound value in the English classroom. This intermingling of the book's characters, the reader's life then, and the reader's life now pierces through this line: "At the same time, my feelings for *Zooey* contained a hard, uncomfortable kernel of self-hatred that never quite dissolved, no matter how many times I read the book" (Samuels, 2005, p. 12). These essays seemed a combination of autobiography and literary criticism, not to mention author biography and literary review. The pieces became immensely popular with the journal's readers.

The graduate students studied the Rereadings essays as a subgenre in class, reread a book of choice, and wrote their own Rereadings essays. I decided to adapt the graduate assignment for my high school students. They seemed well-paired—one group grappling with what it means to teach reading and writing, the other group grappling with what it means to read at all. We would approach reading in the spirit of the fugue, allowing what had been done already to recur and represent itself. While my students began rereading their own books, I began reading some academic works to help me better understand my own pedagogy.

Soja's Fugue: Third Space and Fugal Space

Edward Soja, whose book *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Soja, 1996) helped flesh out my theoretical understanding of what was happening in my classroom, turned to the fugue

as a metaphor for his thinking as well. Soja offered a reconception of a seemingly simple word: *space*. By space, Soja doesn't mean astronomy. His book, he wrote, attempts to "encourage you to think differently about the meanings and significance of space and those related concepts that compose and comprise the inherent *spatiality of human life*: place, location, locality, landscape, environment, home, city, region, territory, and geography" (p. 1).

Soja's work is difficult to fit into a sound bite. It's layered and often convoluted. One education researcher, Elizabeth Moje (2004; Moje et al., 2004), mixes Soja's discussion of spaces with the work of James Paul Gee (1996) to create her own theoretical framework for researching content literacy. Moje and her colleagues (2004) described third space creation in learning experiences as a conflation of first and second spaces. First spaces are unofficial spaces in students' lives—home, interaction with friends, popular culture, for example. Second spaces contain more official aspects of life—school, church, and other institutions. These second spaces are associated with authority and power. When the two spaces are blended together, a third space is created. The explanation offered by Moje et al. (2004) is helpful here:

In third space, then, what seem to be oppositional categories can actually work together to generate new knowledges, new Discourses, and new forms of literacy. Indeed, a commitment to third space demands a suspicion of binaries; it demands that when one reads phrases such as "academic *versus* everyday literacies or knowledge," one wonders about other ways of being literate that are not acknowledged in such simple binary positions. (p. 42)

This particular spatial focus explores "the need for strategic integration of various knowledges, Discourses, and literacies that youth bring to and experience in school" (Moje et al., 2004, p. 41). When students, for example, are encouraged to bring knowledge from familiar aspects of their lives into the classroom, there is the possibility that they will learn more deeply and in new ways.

There is also another idea Soja (1996) wrote about that might be well applied to literacy settings, which serves to complement Moje's (2004; Moje et al., 2004) application of third space. As part of Soja's discussion

of space, he describes his suspicion of a type of movement in space: linearity and sequence. Consider Soja's discussion of the French thinker Henri Lefebvre, who criticizes sequential progress, that is, the idea that over time things naturally move from one thing to another to another, and that these movements should always advance.

The idea of moving sequentially from here to there boils over with assumptions: that there is *an* origin and *a* destination; that progress is measured by forward motion, which advances in a particular way; that there are centers from which things originate that are preferable to vacant margins. Soja (1996), when recapping a work by Lefebvre (whose nontraditional writing method confused him for some time), finally compares the French thinker's thought process and writing style to a fugue. Lefebvre, Soja realized, wrote in a fugue,

a polyphonic composition based on distinct themes which are harmonized through counterpoint and introduced over and over again in different ways through the use of various contrapuntal devices.... As if to emphasize the (counter)point, the fugue ends with "Conclusions" that are also "Openings" or *Ouvertures*. (Soja, 1996, p. 58)

When a fugue repeats musical motifs it also creates newness; when it ends, it begins. What if we apply this reconsideration of sequence and linearity to literacy classrooms and to how reading literature is sometimes taught? How might the fugal space Soja described relate to Moje's (2004; Moje et al., 2004) third space and, most important, to secondary literacy teaching?

The Scholars, the State, and the Fugue

Although such rereadings and fugues haven't been discussed together before as such, scholars and researchers have challenged the linearity of the teaching of literature. We see this questioning of sequence in the writings of English and English education scholars. One might think about Gerald Graff's (1987) discussion of the chronological coverage of English literature in universities or Robert Scholes's (1998) rupturing of traditional literary instruction, the compartmentalized and chronological (or sequential) nature of which he calls the Story of English. Scholes wrote, "This means, I should say, letting go of our Story of English

as our main preoccupation, and giving up our role as exegetes of quasi-religious texts" (p. 85). Later in the book, Scholes recommended measures to be taken on both secondary and university levels in the teaching of English. Both Graff and Scholes decried how the teaching of literature relies on an overly simplistic sense of sequence. Soja (1996) might well echo their cries. For him, sometimes it's productive to break with this linear, forward-moving mindset. And it is the fugue, I think, that exemplifies this break with linearity.

To emphasize, this focus on linearity differs from other ways third space has been applied to literacy settings. Although Moje (2004) provided an application of third space to the classroom, her application doesn't touch on Lefebvre's (cited in Soja, 1996) suspicion of sequence and linearity that resonates with me as an English teacher. Lefebvre's fugue conveys something else: endings that are beginnings and repetitions that spawn newness.

Repetition spawning newness was not what I found in an online visit to New York State's Board of Education website (www.emsc.nysed.gov/guides/ela/part1b.pdf). It confirmed what I had felt: Either implicitly or explicitly, teachers are encouraged to teach literature in a specific sequence. My visit to the website revealed several categories—Kindergarten to 2nd grade, 3rd to 5th grade, 6th to 8th grade, and 9th to 12th—and literary works recommended by teachers of those grades. The compilers of the list prefaced it by saying,

Teachers were asked to suggest books that they felt were "appropriate and successful with readers in the K–12 curriculum." These titles represent a sample of those submitted. The list is not inclusive, nor is it intended as a recommended reading list; rather, it is a list of books that English Language Arts teachers in New York State suggest have literary merit, are representative of the genres and are being read by students in today's classrooms.

The implication of this list is that students are expected to be reading certain books at certain times in their learning careers. There is nothing in the document suggesting students in a 10th-grade English class should be reading E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web*. Charlotte is for children in K–2, not for young adults in high school: The teaching of literary texts is as sequential and linear as a child's passing years.

Re(membering) Reading

By this point, my high school students and I had begun an open dialogue about their lives as readers. As a student group, they were of varying race, class, and gender. Most students were from middle to upper middle class households. They described themselves as white, black, Latino/a, Spanish, Italian, Jewish, or Chinese. All my students were able to find memories of reading books (or having books read to them). Over the course of a few classes, students made two things plain to me about reading: They didn't like being told what to read and they didn't like being told how to read it. The former didn't surprise me. The latter seemed a bit unclear.

"Tell me more about that. What do you mean by 'being told how to read'?"

Alan jumped in, "It's like, we used to be able to just read. Then, around seventh or eighth grade, we had to start analyzing."

"Yeah," added Lisa, "it stopped being reading and started becoming about simile, metaphor, and characterization." She rolled her eyes ever so slightly with each literary device.

"Why do we have to read that way? It's like science class and we have to report on our lab findings," Rob said.

Before I knew it, I found myself spilling out a brief history of reading in American education. I heard myself talking about English as a discipline rising out of the ashes of Greek and Latin studies; how "the canon" was formed as the populace began actually going to school; how in an effort to legitimize literary study in a way that the sciences enjoyed, some scholars—or critics—developed a style of reading and analyzing that mechanized reading. I had to check myself, however—I didn't want to slip my own political feelings about English education into an otherwise dialogic setting. So, I turned it back to the class.

"What is the last happy memory you have of reading?"

Nearly half the class began to share stories about reading. I heard time and time again about the role family played in my students' reading lives. Many students remembered with fondness being read to as children. I asked them to name titles they enjoyed, which students rattled off enthusiastically.

Using children's literature in secondary classrooms isn't a new phenomenon to literacy professionals. Some teachers have even used children's books to engage students in literary theory. In a recent article in *English Journal*, teacher Melissa Troise (2007) used Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax* as a way of exploring Marxist theory—an intriguing example of the power of children's literature. Although the use of children's literature isn't new, per se, there seems to be little written about older students rereading children's books to better understand themselves as readers.

I handed out copies of the introduction to Fadiman's (2005) *Rereadings*. I told the class that they were welcome to read along with me, or they could just listen. I sat and I read aloud. When I finished reading, I shared my plan with the class. What if we went back to when we enjoyed reading? What if we studied this subgenre—the Rereading essay—and used it as a way to revisit and reflect upon our lives as readers?

"Does that mean we have to reread Homer?"

"No. It means your first task is to think about a book you remember enjoying reading. It can be from last year or sixth grade or first grade. The only stipulation is that you enjoyed reading it," I clarified.

"Are you serious? I could bring in Dr. Seuss?"

"Sure. I want each of you to bring in a copy of the book tomorrow. But whatever you do, don't open the book yet."

When the class came in the next day, I smiled at the sight. I had grown used to my 10th-grade students posturing and posing as sophisticated high school students. Yet, here they were beaming as they carried mostly children's and young adult books. I saw the covers of E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web* (recommended for grades K–2), Katherine Patterson's *Bridge to Terabithia* (recommended for grades 3–5), and even the grades 6–8 classic, Gary Paulsen's *Hatchet*. It was as if they had been transported to another time and, especially, space—a fugal space where students' repeated readings of past books seemed to be opening a new exploration of reading.

I asked them to study the covers of their books. Then, I wanted them to write as much as they could recall about the book itself, and then about their reading of it. I wanted detail. I wanted to know how old

they were when they read it; I wanted to know where they read it, the colors of walls, smells in the air; I wanted to know how they remember feeling when they read it and in what parts of the book they recall those feelings. But it all had to be done *before* they reopened the book.

This strict rule about not rereading the book before writing as much as the students could remember came from one of the graduate students. She had found herself doing it on a whim, and shared with the class how thankful she was that she did. When she reread her book now as an adult, her new reading began to supplant the old. Every student I've known to write a Rereadings essay has been thankful for this step.

Over the period of a few weeks, my 10th-grade class studied some Rereadings essays in an effort to understand the components of the subgenre. We spent class periods in small discussion groups, with students sharing their rereading experiences, or we focused on writing certain parts of the essays—the setting of the original reading, for example. Students submitted drafts to me, which I commented on and returned. As students turned in their final drafts I couldn't help but feel that even if we hadn't rekindled a passion for reading, at least we had addressed the losing of it and provided an avenue for exploring that loss. I then began reading my students' Rereadings essays. I found several threads worth sharing here, and even a few lines that I imagine will resonate with other students and teachers alike. I can't help but wonder whether students would have achieved such insight and enthusiasm in their writing if we had studied another new book (in the spirit of linear sequence) and not taken this fugal step.

The Students Reread and Write

Students' Rereadings essays were unlike anything else I had read all year. Their writing seemed sincere, confident, and heartfelt. There was one thread that stood out, especially: Students' relationship with reading often developed in a familial context. The contexts that family provided varied. In many students' papers, things like parental relationships, domestic unrest, and family ritual played a significant role in students' lives as readers. It's worth noting that the examples that follow are all from female students. This is a coincidence. Though it is not the focus of this particular

article, it might be well worth investigating how male students access memories of reading and how they view their own rereading. By reflecting on their lives as readers, my students seemed to write in a space that wasn't quite institutionalized school (though the assignment was given in English class) nor was it purely a familiar home space. Students' writing created what Moje (2004; Moje et al., 2004) described as a third space, one of generation and newness.

Interestingly, many students approached this school assignment (second space) by writing reflectively about their family rituals (first space). One student, Danielle, described weekly trips with her father in a tender tone: "As we opened the doors to the library we headed straight to the children section. I remember there were so many books that I would love to read. I picked up as many books as I could into my little arms." When I read these lines now, I'm moved by the littleness of her arms. Like many adolescents I teach, Danielle is consciously moving from childhood to adulthood. As I kept reading, I was equally moved by Jennifer's capitalization in this sentence, "We sat down and awaited our hot chocolate and stared down at our individual copies of the Big Kids Book." What a sophisticated move as a writer—to capitalize "big kids books" as such.

Another student, Tina, wrote about women in her home: "The sharing of the books shows the bond the women in my family share; we are always passing things down to each other and it's always the women who do things together." I imagine that as Tina enters into adulthood she'll continue to reassess the significance of such a tradition. This slow and sentimental handing-down tradition finds a speedier counterpart in Barbara's writing. Barbara's mother used the morning commute to infuse reading into her daughter's life: "When I was in preschool, my mom read to me on the train. We gained a love of reading together, as she hadn't been raised to be so passionate before. I specifically remember the way sun shined through the train windows at Smith and 9th Street as she read *Charlotte's Web* to me." I myself traveled that same subway line for a few years. Imagine if you can, as E.B. White's words are being spoken aloud in the eerie silence of the morning commute, looking out the train's windows—high above Brooklyn on an elevated train track—at the loading cranes of shipyards, smokestacks

across the river in New Jersey, and a collection of industrial buildings, each its own shade of putty.

One student's words stood out to me for a different reason, though it too focuses on the first space of family life. Although many of these young writers chose to recall their reader-pasts with fondness, Regina evoked a different set of feelings and images. Her opening line set the tone: "I grew up in a cold home." I myself notice immediately the coldness aside the warmth I associate with the word "home." She went on to describe the sounds, "The noises of yelling and screaming heard above the stereo each night caused irreversible damage. Fighting could be heard from down the hall and all I needed was an escape, something to take my mind away from the noise." Whereas one might expect such sounds to be muffled in the softness of pillows or earmuffs, Regina headed to the bathroom to read, though her parents had forbidden such literary outings: "Being under my covers with a flashlight or in my bathtub became a way of life for me at night. I became very good at listening for my parents creaking footsteps, my signal to go back to bed or turn out the light." Barbara found her own space in her books, one that was neither familial nor institutional. It is important to note that it was a fugal approach to teaching reading that made this third space possible.

More often than not, students' recollection of reading as a younger person was saturated in enjoyment. In part, I encouraged this by asking the initial question the way I did: How do we reclaim the joy of reading? But at the same time, students did not resist a return to such happy memories. Even students who had voiced an initial inability to associate joy and reading only had to be coaxed to return to earlier memories. The joy of reading might not have been reclaimed, but it had been at least revisited. It's a first step, but there is more to be done surrounding the acceptance of linear sequence in the teaching of literature—what might this look like through the lenses of other theorists? More is to be done in my own classroom—what will happen when I include in our next Rereadings unit a reflection component that asks students how their writing of Rereadings essays affected their reading lives? Also, more time is merited for an exploration of how Rereadings might play out in other classrooms, to see its logistics and possibilities for other teachers of reading.

Rereading Spaces and Fugues: Suggestions for Classroom Colleagues

It seems that discussions of what-books-to-teach-when are just that: discussions about books. Rather than focusing on the individuality of each reader, such discussions go the way of canonicity, or scope and sequence (Harris, 1991). When Applebee (1992) wrote about the books actually being taught in high schools, exploring the absence of minority and women authors, he admitted that

Literature is a somewhat ambiguous concept in the teaching of English, including in different classrooms a range of genres and media. One way to gain a sense of what 'counts' most is to examine the amount of time teachers devote to literature of various types. (p. 29)

For me, it doesn't matter if certain books "count" for teachers if their students are not invested in reading anyway. This focus on literary texts seems misplaced if it leads to neglecting things like students' actual readership, memories of their lives as readers, and reasons for reading at all.

The ways teachers assign books and the way schools and departments buy books is also worth considering. In a recent article on intervening with struggling readers, Allington (2007) discussed his surprise that middle and high schools continue to assign readings that are too hard for their students: "Struggling readers need books they can read—accurately, fluently, and with strong comprehension—in their hands all day long in order to exhibit maximum educational growth" (p. 8). He warned school districts that buying class sets of books might be heading down the wrong road for students' readership. Readers are individuals. Allington went on to offer concrete suggestions for school districts to help struggling readers.

I find Allington's ideas relevant not only to the district level of education but to my students' work with Rereadings as well. Though my students might not have been called "struggling" based on standardized test scores, the fact is they weren't reading for a class many of them said they enjoyed. In light of Allington's words, our move to reread books from students' pasts emphasizes students' ability to read and, perhaps more important, to enjoy reading. It brought many of them back to a time when reading meant something else. It recalled

the educational growth and personal growth they had in fact made, perhaps boosting their confidence for future growth. Although I acknowledge that some schools might make such straying from the linear progression of literary study difficult, I still offer a suggestion.

The single suggestion that I have for classroom colleagues is to create a space and time to ask students about their lives as readers. See what you hear. What were your students like as readers in elementary school? Do they remember being read to as children? What was the effect of that? Did they ever enjoy reading? Do they still? What happens to our joy of reading as we age? I know that opening up a dialogue about whether students actually read their assigned readings is intimidating and uncomfortable. But it might also offer a new trust and dialogue to the classroom culture.

What if English teachers opened up to the fugal possibility that rereading books from earlier years might help students build confidence, understanding, and excitement about their lives as readers? Although the level of reading might at first be considered below students' ability, my own experience has suggested that that is precisely why rereading might be effective. Rereading isn't about cracking into the elusive imagery and diction of an author, or about exploring the effects of early 20th-century capitalism on the human condition, though these types of readings can be valuable. Rereading is about the reader. And these readers, when they are our students, spend their educational careers moving from teacher to teacher, room to room, negotiating life's ups and downs, with no time set aside to genuinely inquire into who they were, are, and might be as readers. We teachers sometimes approach literature like a trumpet charge rather than a fugue. There might be much to be gained by emphasizing the "re" in reading.

One passage from Soja's (1996) work stands out to me as one on with which it is worth concluding: "Everything comes together in Thirdspace: subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable..." (p. 56). I would be quick to add students' past readings and readings to come. Perhaps, like a fugue, we can reintroduce texts that students have read and enjoyed as a way to remember and mourn and celebrate and grow as readers. I imagine a fugal space where students are encouraged to investigate themselves as

readers, where what the reader has read, is reading, and wants to read becomes swirled into who the reader is. In this new fugal space, students might conduct readings that are recollective *and* progressive, and this ambivalent relationship might foster artistic newness and development. Such a third space might well begin with a fugal rereading of a student's childhood favorite.

Note

To use the strategies described in this article in your classroom, see I Remember That Book: Rereading as a Critical Investigation on *ReadWriteThink.org*. The lesson offers step-by-step directions for how to implement this rereading project and includes sample student work as well as a sample evaluative rubric. Find it by going to *www.ReadWriteThink.org* and clicking on Lessons.

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