

# The Voices of Power and the Power of Voices:

## Teaching with Native American Literature

**T**he weight and thickness of Mike's new literature book in English class intimidated him. He opened the book searching for Native American writers whose work he loved to read. Sherman Alexie was his favorite. As he fingered through the table of contents, all he found was a poem about Hiawatha, two stories in the mythology chapter, and one short story in the "Other Literatures" chapter in the back of the book. Sighing heavily, he gazed out the classroom window feeling bored and knowing that this English class would be more of the same. He closed his eyes and his mind, questioning the system and wondering to himself, "Why can't we read the good stuff in English class?"

Some teachers may view including other voices, particularly Native American voices, as a new approach to teaching Language Arts. Others already include these voices since the multiculturalism movement was espoused decades ago. Too often, however, the Language Arts curriculum still excludes the Native American voice in favor of the "voices of power," the works of dominant culture. When certain voices are excluded, students never hear and experience the "power of voices," and thus teachers deprive young readers of one purpose of literature: to read and learn about themselves and others in life.

"The Power of Voices and the Voices of Power" is a title from 1998 conference proceedings, and a presentation given by [Elsa Auerbach](#), from the University of Massachusetts in Boston. She contends that "current educational practices actively exclude the voices of those who are not from the dominant cultural group" (2). In using the phrases related to

### Native American Voices

**A**fter reading this article, Native American writers, Simon Ortiz, Laura Tohe and Cynthia Leitich Smith, shared their thoughts on the importance of Native American voices in the lives of all young people and in the high school curriculum.

*Simon Ortiz:* "It is vastly important and necessary that Native (or Indigenous) American literature be a basic part of high school education for three reasons:

1. Indigenous cultural knowledge is an essential part of the cultural community of the present American world.
2. Land, culture, and community are intrinsically the binding elements of overall cultural connection to the natural landscape of the environment and the world as a whole.
3. The power of the Indigenous voice comes from the cultural connection to the world. Native American literature is an expression of that connection."

*Cynthia Leitich Smith:* Many of today's Native writers are among the very best. Bernelda Wheeler's (Cree/Ojibwe/Métis) gentle humor makes a point in "Where Did You Get Your Moccasins?" The Birchbark books by Louise Erdrich (Turtle Mountain Band Chippewa) show a

different perspective than could be viewed from a certain little house and inspire a generation to cheer for Omakayas, a strong Native girl. Few novelists rank with Sherman Alexie (Spokane-Coeur d'Alene) or poets with Joy Harjo (Muskogee). They say, the greater the adversity, the greater the hero. Read Native literature for its quality and because, boy, do we have some heroes for you.

*Laura Tohe:* At the heart of Indigenous belief come expression of songs, prayers, and stories that bring us to learn where we came from, who we are, and our paths toward greater knowing. The voices of long ago and the voices of today's Native writers are crucial and an essential part of a curriculum that strives to understand and appreciate the rich literary and cultural heritage of America's first nations. To see one's self in a writer's words is powerful and freeing. To see Native American writer's books alongside other classic works is affirming and beneficial to all students.

“voice,” Auerbach states: “I’ve quoted these two voices because they seem to me to represent two different and sometimes conflicting responses to dominant pedagogies” (2). With this concept in mind, I borrow the “voice” phrases to discuss language arts pedagogy and the importance of including Native American Literature. This means using the novel, short story, poetry, and essay by Native American writers. It also extends to other texts such as film, websites, narratives, and historical documents

## Native Americans Can Speak For Themselves

In her article, “When the First Voice You Hear is not Your Own,” [Jacqueline Jones Royster](#) discusses cross-boundary discourse and her own need “to understand human differences as a complex reality” (611). She asserts that those who are members of a particular community should speak for themselves. She contends that “subject position really is everything” (611) and “voice” is the “central manifestation of subjectivity” (612). Despite the fact that ethnic and minority communities can speak for themselves, too

often someone else speaks for or about them. Time and time again, this has happened with Native American people. [Barbara J. Kuipers](#) informs us:

Very few non-Native writers have bothered to acquire the knowledge to produce meaningful work about our history, cultures and lives—although this ignorance does not stop them from doing the books, and getting published . . . . In fact, Indians are the only Americans whose history has been set down almost exclusively by those who are not members of the group about which they are writing. (Kuipers 140)

This underscores the need for Native Americans to speak for themselves, for teachers to invite these voices, and for our students to read and hear what they have to say. It is also important to recognize diversity among Native American nations by telling which tribe(s) a writer belong to. I have done so following the first mention of each writer's name.

Simon Ortiz, Acoma poet and writer, explains that in his pueblo community, “You formally announce your intention to speak and when you do so respectfully, you are recognized for what you have to offer.” Community members then stand up and give voice to their Self. He continues, saying, “Now it is my turn to stand. I’m rising to stand and speak...,” ([Ortiz xi](#)), as he writes for himself and for other Native American writers who have literature to share. Native Americans have much to say and have done so in various genres. They speak eloquently, creatively, intelligently, and honestly. Who is their audience? The many young people in the language arts classrooms can be their audience. However, the teacher's invitation is the only way into the classroom.

## Meeting Current Curriculum Demands

While some educators feel that high stakes testing influences and interferes with what schools teach (or don't teach), others take a more positive view and find ways to make education meaningful while meeting state standards. A Mohawk woman, Dr. L. Rosa Minoka, cites a family maxim, and says: “Don't let school interfere with your education” (qtd. in [Ortiz 80](#)). Indeed, school has done exactly that when today's language arts teachers focus more on preparing for standardized tests and overlook what many feel is “real education.” Schools should also teach students about the world—the people they live with, the stories and messages of others, the diversity of

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indication of content taught in language arts classrooms, the Native American voice is largely missing. Just as my students do, I also look in a literature textbook's table of contents for Native writers included among the other authors. I yearn to see Native writers like Joy Harjo, Luci Tapahonso (Navajo), Linda Hogan (Chickasaw), and Simon Ortiz, to name a few, but usually they are absent. What does this selectiveness and exclusion of voices teach our students? What does it maintain and perpetuate? Students do not get "the whole picture" of what literature and language arts can be if they hear only the voices of power.

Many voices in multicultural literature are speaking, but not all are seen as "powerful" in the social, economic, and political sense. Native Americans fall into this narrow vision. Although they are a small population, they have influenced and contributed much to this country. They embody an ancient history and they flourish today as unique nations. They were not killed off by John Wayne, and they do not live in cupboards or only in Disney movies. Indian people inhabit every region of this country and their voices resonate strongly and proudly. This diverse population represents many voices and experiences,

cultures. Our students need cross-boundary knowledge, interaction, and experiences to learn how to live in an interdependent world. Literature can help achieve such goals. Education should require that students read, recognize, and appreciate literary contributions not only of white Americans and European writers, but also of other ethnic groups. Here, I am especially referring to the literature of more than 250 Native American nations that are indigenous to this land.

Too often textbooks drive the curriculum, and if textbooks are any

and their power resonates in voices of knowledge and wisdom.

Esther G. Belin, American Indian writer of the Dine (Navajo) Nation, tells about her 1990 university experience when she and other students raised concerns about diversity, expressing their wish for the power of voices in their schooling. Her statement also informs about the expansiveness of Native American identity and existence. She says:

My voice and the voices of other Natives on campus were not simply our own. We spoke the voices of our nations, our clan relations, our families. To tell or re-tell our story is not pleasant. And it is not short. It did not begin with the civil rights movement. It is not as simple as the word *genocide*. It is every voice collective. It is mixed-blood, cross-blood, full-blood, urban, rez, relocated, terminated, nonstatus, tribally enrolled, federally recognized, non-federally recognized, alcoholic, battered, uranium-infested (Belin 62).

Her eloquent statement reveals that there is no one-size-fits-all "Indian" or "Native American," an important point to understand for anyone choosing to teach Native American Literature. Many teachers may feel that using Native American voices is too complex, too controversial, too risky, too time-consuming, too political, too painful, and too many other things. It may seem easier to leave them out of the curriculum, stick with the literature textbook, concentrate on the big test, and stay in the comfort zone. If such attitudes are prevalent among language arts teachers, my hope is to change this way of thinking.

Ah, but we always come back to the tests! *How can we teach with Native American Literature? Why? We have standards to cover. Reading that kind of literature is not specified in the curriculum guide. What if my superintendent catches me [teaching Native American Literature]?* I have heard all these before. They are legitimate concerns in the wake of high-stakes testing and teacher accountability. Theodore Sizer, professor of education, talks about standards and confirms these teachers' worries in his book *Horace's School*. He says, "A familiar argument shoved at those who teach students in a variety of ways is that standards will be compromised." He goes on to say:

Wise schools do not vary the standards of accomplishment when they are clear. What they vary is the means to the ends, in ways that respect the particular differences of par-

ticular children. Such is not a compromise of academic standards. Indeed, it is a modeling of good scholarship, an example of the use of knowledge in practice: it takes serious account of what we know about human learning, about the availability of ways of learning, of making sense of the world. (33)

Using Native American Literature is one means to help students think, ask questions, and make sense of the world. In addition, teachers can find and select diverse literature that has literary and social elements appropriate for teaching required standards.

## Education's Larger Purpose

Beyond high-stakes testing and test-driven instruction, teachers hold a larger purpose and responsibility to students. In *Horace's Compromise*, another book by Theodore Sizer, the author realistically describes the balance teachers must find between curriculum and instruction and the young lives in the school classrooms. He states:

There are many influences on the development of a young person's personality, of course, and school is only one. But it can be a powerful one . . ." (122).

Teachers play a huge role as decision-maker, change agent, and as determiner of whose voices are heard and experienced in the classroom. Essentially, pedagogy rests on values, and "Value issues infuse every classroom" (Sizer 123). In relation to choices and young minds, author John Gaughn says in his book *Cultural Reflections*, "School is a controlled environment. We condition children to behave in certain ways, to assume certain attitudes, to become certain kinds of Americans" (23). Will our students learn to be thoughtful and appreciative of other voices, viewpoints, and perspectives? Many voices wait at the doors of classrooms, and it is up to teachers to say, "Welcome. Come into our classroom."

The voices of many different people can be powerful. Judith Ortiz Cofer, a Puerto Rican writer and educator, states:

This is what I have learned from writing as a minority person in America that I can teach my students: Literature is the human search for meaning. It is as simple and as profound as that. And we are all, if we are thinking people, involved in the process. It is both a privilege and a burden (562-563).

As language arts teachers, we must accept that

privilege and burden because we are accountable for the development of a young person's personality.

## Preparation To Teach

Teaching Native American Literature requires that teachers do thoughtful homework. Even as a Native American teacher who taught Native students, I had to do my homework. While there are some similarities among Native tribes, many differences exist and each tribal nation must be viewed as a separate and distinct. In teaching texts that derive from a Native American writer and community, teachers must provide enough contextual information—cultural, social, and historical—especially if not providing this impedes understanding and appreciation of the literary work. More importantly, it is essential if not providing this could perpetuate prejudice, stereotypes, and negative or racist feelings.

Teachers who utilize this "voices of power" method of teaching should do so with a sense of purpose, preparedness, and respect. As Jacqueline Jones Royster says in the previously mentioned essay, when you're entering someone else's home as a guest, your own "home training" must prevail. I assume these refer to manners, consideration, kindness, carefulness, and open-mindedness. For teachers on this journey, it requires knowing where you're going, why, how you'll get there, what you'll do about obstacles and detours, what kinds of activities and learning can occur from that place. I presume English teachers prepare this way with any kind of literary journey even if it is not the "traditional" or canonized literary work from the textbook or curriculum guide.

Native American Literature invites inquiry, and it sometimes carries limitations, risks and boundaries. Teachers must be prepared to answer, explore, and handle questions and issues that arise not only from the literature but from student voices and their

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responses and reactions. The encounters and experiences of Native Americans, both past and present, are not always pretty pictures. Sometimes, Native authors' writing could be misinterpreted rather than understood because they write honestly about their experiences. Their voices evoke emotion while they express anger for being misunderstood, disrespected, oppressed, and colonized.

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They may speak of mistrust for non-natives who abuse their culture and language, exploit their talents and resources, imitate and abuse their sacred ceremonies, and they distrust people who generally look down upon them as inferior and invisible. Teachers must be prepared to guide students in their awareness and

understanding that there are contrasts in the American experience and literature reminds us of this. My former colleague at Window Rock High School once said about using [James Welch's](#) (Blackfeet) novel *Fools Crow*, "Many students comment upon how mistakes made by either side led to huge misunderstandings and tragic consequences." Not only does the Native American text give students understanding of the past, it also teaches them about present-day interactions and relations.

I have taught Native American Literature on the Navajo Indian Reservation for many years, and find that a number of my Indian students have some understanding of tribal or indigenous language and culture. For works of literature from other tribes, however, students need some background information of that particular nation's historical, cultural, and contemporary status. Like my colleague, I also have taught Welch's *Fools Crow*. Before and during the reading of this book, supplementary material aided comprehension and appreciation of this novel. Finding primary and/or supplementary materials to teach Native American Literature takes time, but it is no different than if a teacher were using any text with no ready-made, pull-it-out-of-the resource-binder kind of material. Furthermore, this aspect of learning and searching gives purpose for various student activities,

projects, and research—reasons for them to inquire, explore, discover (and uncover), and make sense of the literature they are reading.

Teaching with the "power of voices" should be an ongoing, natural activity, not a gimmick. Using Native American literature should not be only during November, the one month that America recalls Pilgrims and Indians. Lakota writer, Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve speaks about this particular time of the year "when paper products are illustrated with cute happy Indians and smiling turkeys on disposable plates, napkins and cups." She continues and asks a profound question: "Is this a comment on American Indians as also being disposable?" ([Sneve 299](#))

### **Selecting and Evaluating What To Use**

One reason many Native American writers are not in textbooks is because they still live and own the rights to their writing. Their books are published through independent or small press publishers and have to be purchased as supplementary texts for English class. Whose voice will be heard through these selected materials? How do you judge or evaluate a book or other literary materials to be used in language arts? In his teacher's guide, *Reading Native American Literature*, [Bruce A. Goebel](#) says, "Most specialists in multicultural literature argue that two selection criteria are of utmost importance—cultural authenticity and literary excellence" (3).

Teachers should keep in mind that much has been written by non-Natives about Native American people, some of which is acceptable, although good texts written by Native writers are preferable. Evaluation criteria, for teacher use, were developed in the early 1970's and continue through more recent times. Barbara J. Kuipers's checklist is very helpful in evaluating Native American books. In her chapter, "Understanding the Evaluation Criteria for American Indian Literature," she provides extensive and valuable information that utilizes the voices of various Native people to develop the criteria. Her work includes the input from eighty-seven Native American tribes representing all regions of the United States and comprised of parents, teachers, and administrators ([Kuipers 5](#)).

At the top of her checklist is authorship. When selecting and evaluating Native literature, ask, who is

the author? What is the author's Native background and affiliation? From which Native community is the author speaking? Native writers will present a much richer and more accurate story than any other writer could, and they are less likely to use stereotypes. A. A. Hedge Coke, a mixed-heritage writer, says, ". . . The more rooted people are in their own community, the more likely their work will lead there" (Coke 114). However, the issue of Indian identity is complex and beyond the scope of this article. One does not have to look too far to find an example of Indian identity problems. A recent example is Nasdjiid, author of *The Blood Runs like a River Through My Dreams* who made national news when he was uncovered as a non-native man posing as a Navajo author after writing and publishing for several years. Sherman Alexie, (Spokane / Couer d'Alene) expressed suspicion of this writer because of the book's similarities to one of his short stories. Alexie says, "I approached Nasdijj's publishers telling them his book not only was borderline plagiarism, but it also failed to mention specific tribal members, clans, ceremonies and locations, all of which are vital to the concept of Indian identity" (Alexie 72). Teachers must find reliable background information on authors and make professional and ethical decisions about authorship and what material to use.

In addition to the authorship factor, another criterion is accuracy. Native people want to be depicted in accurate ways. Many a writer has profited from books that inaccurately portray Native Americans. Stereotypes and negative images still abound in many books. Some plots contain weird and unexplainable occurrences happening, perhaps revealing the authors' inaccurate notions and images of Native people. Other books include made-up tribal rituals that don't exist or indigenous customs and ceremonies that are trivialized, distorted, and inappropriate. These inaccuracies only exploit Indian people and perpetuate misunderstanding and disconnect among people.

A book can lack objectivity, an important evaluative consideration. An appropriate book should avoid stereotypes and prejudice. The language used should not be offensive. For example, if an author uses the word "savage" instead of "man" to describe a native male, or "squaw" instead of "woman," then this book is not objective. Furthermore, if Indian people are portrayed engaging only in negative actions and no

positive aspects are included, or only weaknesses and no strengths are portrayed, the book has bias (Kuipers 23-25). When only one side of an issue is presented—usually the dominant culture's—objectivity is definitely lacking.

Native Americans want to be depicted in authentic ways. One young adult literature book I read had on the cover a picture of a teenage girl looking into the distance while a hazy and faded picture of an Indian teen in traditional attire was situated in the background. As it turns out, the Indian teen was a long-ago ghost whom only the young girl could see. Why couldn't the Indian teen perhaps have been a student in her school? A peer. Imagine the message conveyed if this Indian teen were included in the adolescent world and treated with dignity and inclusion instead of as a ghost only appearing at night to scare the young girl. Any book that speaks of Native people in the past tense, or as "vanished" or "no longer living" is not authentic to the lives of Indian people today.

Evaluation could also include teachers looking at their reasons for teaching Native American Literature from a philosophical standpoint. In his chapter, "Teaching Native American Literature: Reflections and Responsibilities," Bruce Goebel discusses two important questions for teachers to consider: 1) Why do you want to teach Native American Literature? and 2) What are my responsibilities in the Classroom when teaching Native American Literature? (Goebel 1-3, 6-7). I recommend this chapter to those teachers looking for resources to educate themselves.

## Some Experiences and Suggestions

The demographics involved when teaching Native American Literature determine the choices for instructional practices. Assessing student needs specifies how teaching and learning will occur. My past teaching experiences on my reservation made it less difficult to

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teach Native literary works because of student awareness and consciousness about living and being Native American. For my particular location and student population, using reader-response for literature study served effectively.

I used reading logs in which students personally responded to their reading. They taped a “leading sentences” page inside their spiral notebooks, in case they were stuck as to what to write (a common excuse students make), but students soon became comfortable with the text and made many text-to-reader connections. This particular method was used as we read [Robert J. Conley’s](#) (Cherokee writer) *Mountain Windsong* and *Navajo Stories from the Long Walk Period*.

Both books discuss Indian removal from ancestral lands from the viewpoints of Cherokee and Navajo people. Students were unaware of similar stories and experiences from two different tribes so placing the two texts alongside each other allowed more connections to be made. Their reading

logs and our class discussions were rich with responses, as well as realization and appreciation of the power of literature, of stories, of words and language. In addition, they learned about the human spirit from other people, times, and places.

Recently, I communicated with a former colleague who now teaches at a large New Mexico high school which borders the Navajo Reservation. She is not Native American, but she teaches with Native American literature to Native American, Hispanic and Caucasian students. She explains her use of Native texts: “I don’t believe any American Literature curriculum is complete without Native American voices. That just doesn’t make sense.” She uses a wide selection of

texts in her course throughout the school year while stressing diversity and relations among the different American ethnic and cultural groups. Among other things, in their literary study of James Welch’s *Fools Crow*, for example, students look at balanced characterization—complex characters with strengths and weaknesses. They address stereotypes and the authors’ efforts to represent white people both symbolically and realistically,

Teachers just beginning to teach with Native American Literature can start small—using short pieces of literature—and work with these while gaining confidence and making modifications. I find that short Native literary works can be used well in thematic units. Eventually, teachers can move to longer units or novels. Overall, the success of incorporating and teaching with Native American Literature depends largely on the teacher’s preparation, approach, and attitude.

## Possible Challenges and Problems

In their article “Multicultural Literature and Discussion as Mirror and Window?” [Jocelyn Glazier and Jung-A Seo](#) discuss some problems encountered in the teaching of *The Way to Rainy Mountain* by N. Scott Momaday, a Kiowa writer. The article critiques non-native teachers teaching Native American Literature to non-native students. They use reader response and report that these students had difficulty making connections and felt “cultureless.” How can you know about culture and understand your own if you have never read the cultures of others? The voices of power dominate classrooms so prevalently that when a different voice is allowed to speak, some students are stunned. Perhaps they are not comfortable with the feeling because they no longer are the “subject” and have lost “position.” Might this be what schools protect when they perpetuate the voices of power?

Conversely, how do students who are members of minority ethnic groups feel when day after day and year after year, they hear only the voices of dominant culture writers? How does it feel to know that your people, your history, your culture, your existence do not matter and are not valued? In this same classroom study, the authors report that this Momaday’s book elicited many responses from minority group students who otherwise were silent. They connected to the

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book strongly, had many reactions and responses to share, caused and participated in lively classroom discussions, and perhaps, felt that school could be a place that valued them.

Other challenges are described in the article, “The Way to Confusion” by [Gary L. McLaughlin](#) which appeared in the *English Journal* (October 1997), in which he describes possible problematic areas for non-native teachers using Native American Literature. This author participated in Native American Literature conference workshops where a prominent message was to use literature in which Native Americans speak for themselves. Three other valid points arose from the presenters (two Native American and one non-native): 1) the importance of understanding the background that accompanies Native American works, 2) problems that translation of ceremonial songs and other traditional texts present, 3) Native American spirituality as part of the literature and how non-natives can not fully understand this (72).

McLaughlin left the conference confused. He states: “I also sensed that the workshop presenters were arguing that Native writers ‘owned’ their works, and readers with incomplete knowledge were to be viewed as trespassers, not guests.” This goes back to Royster’s caution about the right to your own “home” and the obligation people have to be careful in other peoples’ homes. This advice seems to encourage yet caution teachers who wish to invite the Native voice into their language arts classroom, and who wish to do so intelligently, sensitively, and respectfully. I hope this article dispels the thinking that only native teachers should teach Native American Literature and that it should be taught only to Native American students.

Another concern some language arts teachers may have is that they have no training to teach Native American Literature. What I envision is that teachers would challenge themselves and incorporate Native American Literature into their classrooms rather than operating on resistance and fear. In [McLaughlin’s](#) article, he quotes Diane Long Hoeveler who implores that “anyone teaching Native writers ‘should begin with a careful reading of a few very helpful studies’ (74). Again, I point in the direction of Natives themselves when seeking literary criticism and literary studies before reading the works of others. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn of the Crow Creek Sioux tribe and writer,

poet, and former professor, informs us of the native voice in the academic world when she says, “The emergence of the indigenous voice in academia in the last several decades has been recognized as a huge breakthrough for the right to speak for oneself and one’s people” (Cook-Lynn 80).

### **Literature To Read and To Transform**

Teachers must realize that Native American Literature exists as a literature and its purpose is to be read. Literature lives “out there” among people and voices call for readers. **Contemporary Native American literature is comprised of subjects that are not**

“Indian writing” (the notion that Indian writers write only about Indian topics) **and fit with universal themes studied in classrooms: poems of love and loss, stories about basketball, essays about family, and many other topics that can be used in classrooms.** Native people should not be viewed as so “out of this world” that non-natives cannot relate to them. They are human beings who while they have unique culture, language, lifestyle, and worldview, they live in this world as global citizens and indigenous people. Their story is not a romanticized or stereotyped one as the movies often depict, nor is their story always a positive or a tragic one. This aspect of Native American life cannot and should not be overlooked. Students ask questions; young people look for meaning and want to know more. Literature can inform them; thoughtful and caring teachers can guide them.

Literature is powerful and can change lives. In her article, Laura Mellas speaks with Leslie Silko, renowned Native American writer originally from Laguna pueblo who believes that literature can

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transform. **Silko** insists:

The way you change human beings and human behavior is through a change in consciousness and that can be effected only through literature, music, poetry—the arts. (14)

These changes reflect the new ways of teaching language arts: a curriculum of inclusion rather than exclusion, a curriculum that utilizes and advocates for the power of voices rather than only the voices of power. If we teach our young about other cultures living with and among them, we help shape personalities, attitudes, and lives. As teachers, perhaps we could transform for better understanding and appreciation among people. Native American Literature can help this happen now and for the future.

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