

## Postcolonial, Decolonial Research Dilemmas: Fieldwork in Australian Indigenous Contexts

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### Abstract

*We come to this paper as non-Indigenous teacher educators working as qualitative researchers in postcolonial/decolonial (Mignolo, 2000) times. We explore matters related to schooling in remote Australian Indigenous communities. In this paper, we respond to Delamont's invitation for qualitative researchers to revisit (Delamont and Hamilton, 1984) and think reflexively (Delamont, 2009) about our field work research methods. In doing so, attention is drawn to research processes involved with observing, narrating and writing lives and experiences. We highlight matters related to sequencing dilemmas (Delamont, 2009), the need to locate the self-as-researcher in the social (Delamont, 2007) and calling out ethical tensions associated with the 'catch 22' of confidentiality and acknowledgement (Delamont, 2007). Two separate researcher recounts of field notes are used to render visible our reflexive thinking as we attempt to negotiate Western educational research ethics policies and procedures and ways of knowing and being in Indigenous contexts.*

**Keywords** - research ethics, western ethics, Indigenous education, non-Indigenous researchers, reflexive thinking, research obligation, confidentiality/acknowledgement dilemma, reciprocal benefits

### Locating history, locating researchers

We come to this paper as education researchers working within the Australian university sector exploring issues of inequality and poverty through the deployment of qualitative research methods. We each specialise in the sociology of education, using semi-structured interviews to 'cross fertilize' (Delamont and Hamilton, 1984) our ethnographic observations within cycles of inductive and deductive reasoning. We've each been involved as classroom teachers and researchers in educational contexts supporting and being supported by Indigenous educators and their communities. For each of us, our main work is not as a researcher of Indigenous education; but it is part of the work we each do as educational researchers.

As we add to our evolving appreciation of researching in Indigenous contexts and researching *with* Indigenous participations, a number of tensions and realisations about methods come to the fore. We consider a recount documented by Beryl Exley about the problematic of the University imposed official ethical consent templates and the confidentiality/acknowledgement dilemma (Delamont, 2007) that carries through to research output. The second recount is from Susan Whatman (hereafter Sue) and her experiences as she learns that when researching in Indigenous communities, approvals are ongoing rather than finite, conditional and reciprocal. We demonstrate that removing the researcher from the metaphorical 'ivory tower' (Delamont, 2005) and into the 'social' enterprise of the research context (Delamont, 2007) has advantages for the research but also adds to the messiness of the research and the research process (Delamont, et al., 1997). The article's conclusion emphasises the need for researchers to formally document the lived reality and points of tension as an important part of the description of research design. We contend that all too often discussions around research methods are tidied up, rather than revealed.

In the Australian context from which we write, being non-Indigenous researchers from the dominant hegemonic group that 'controls' educational systems (Singh, 1994, 1997), exploring the schooling

experiences of Indigenous students (Exley, 2010, 2012; Whatman, 2000; 2004, Whatman and Singh, 2015), and the extended Indigenous communities which support them (Exley, et al., 2016), is a complex undertaking. As we think about this space and its interrelationships, we are cognisant of '*white Australia's black history*', a decades old slogan used to render visible that which has remained invisible or silenced in school curriculum. Knowledge of invasion, dispossession and colonisation of Indigenous Australians has long remained in the margins of school curriculum (Exley and Chan, 2014). However, it is at this point we stall once again in a tension riddled quagmire of using slogans to summarise, and by default, distil a long list of issues that should not be made light of. Not only is the list long, many issues are also culturally sensitive, enormously complicated and repeating the specifics does not always fulfil a productive purpose for Australia's Indigenous peoples. Juxtaposed against this thinking is the tension of not providing sufficient context about the ways in which Indigenous Australians are one of the most researched groups in the country (see Bainbridge, et al., 2015), and yet on all social indicators remain the most disadvantaged (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2016). We therefore offer an abridged version of three main events for international readers not familiar with the political context in Australia. In chronological order, three major events that set the scene include (i) the erroneous declaration of Indigenous land as '*terra nullius*' in 1770 by British Explorer Captain James Cook, (ii) the subsequent invasion of Indigenous land by the '*First Fleet*' on behalf of the British Crown in 1788, and (iii) from 1901, since the formation of the Commonwealth of Australia, the 100 plus years of dispossession, violence and forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families and culture (see Australian Human Rights Commission, 2018).

The term Indigenous Australian is used to refer to both Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2018). Of the 649,200 people who identified as being of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander origin in the Australian Census from 2016 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018), 91% were of Aboriginal origin, 5.0% were of Torres Strait Islander origin and 4.1% identified as being of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin. In this paper, both recounts are about research projects undertaken in schools in the Torres Strait Islands. Geographically, the Torres Strait Islands are located at the northern tip of the State of Queensland. Of the 274 islands, 17 are currently inhabited with nearly 7000 islanders. A further 42 000 Torres Strait Islanders live on the Australian mainland. Most adult Torres Strait Islanders are multi-lingual, often speaking Torres Strait Islander Creole in addition to their home language and Standard Australian English. In the Torres Strait Island schools, English is usually used as the medium of instruction from Year 4 (students aged 8-9 years). After students complete Year 6 (students aged 10–11 years) at their local school, they leave their island home and communities to board at the regional Secondary School on the largest island, or at a non-Government Boarding school on the mainland for the remaining six years of their schooling careers.

We three identify as non-Indigenous Australians. Sue (1993:245) notes the imperative for white researchers to 'begin to understand themselves as racial/cultural beings'. Following Aboriginal academic Karen Martin (2008:69), our relations to this paper are also 'physical, spiritual, political, geographical, intellectual, emotional, social, historical, sensory, instinctive and intuitive'. In an attempt to come to know more about the entities of our relatedness, we reflect on three research questions. Our purpose for writing about ourselves is less to do with the 'self anguish' of autoethnography (Delamont, 2007:3) and more to do with 'autobiographical reflexivity' (Delamont, 2009). In here, we attempt to be 'acutely sensitive' (Delamont, 2009) to the interrelationships between ourselves, other participants in the setting and the phenomenon being studied. The three questions prompted by Martin's (2008) relational theory are thus:

- From where do I come?
- What is my relationship to Indigenous educational research?
- What is my interest in writing a paper about researching in Indigenous education?

Beryl Exley was born in the 1960s on *Wiradjuri* land in rural central New South Wales, Australia, to monolingual English-speaking working-class parents of mixed-European heritage. She was raised on the red clay of *Yuggera* land (South-East Queensland), along the edges of *Quandamooopah* (Moreton Bay). She remembers playing with the neighbourhood children in the large Moreton Bay Fig Trees, and watching the Stradbroke Island ferry travel between *Minjerribah* (Stradbroke Island) and the mainland. She travelled to *Minjerribah* for interschool sports, undertake geography excursions and learning about contemporary Indigenous literature written by the Elder, poet, writer, artist and educator Oodgeroo Noonuccal. Her way of understanding the world as a physical entity stood in stark contrast to those expounded by Karen Martin's (2008:70) clear and strong Aboriginal understandings of the relatedness between Entities, Country, People and Land. After finishing secondary schooling, Beryl graduated from teachers' college. Her interactions with Indigenous Australian peoples included teaching those who attended urban schools and/or preservice teaching programs. Rather than being dialogical and facilitating a sharing of epistemologies and ontologies, in what Nakata (2011: 2) described as an 'intercultural locale', curricula content and its pedagogies and assessment were firmly entrenched in the hegemonic White Australian discourses. She worked as a university-based teacher educator and researcher in a Torres Strait Islander community in 2008 (see Exley, 2010, 2012). It is her recount of this experience that forms scenario 1.

Susan (Sue) Whatman was born and raised on *Minjungbal* land bordered by the *Bundjulong* Nation to the south and the *Yugumbeh* Nation to the north. Colonial maps call this area far northern New South Wales, close to the Queensland state border. Sue's ancestry on both sides originate from England and Scotland, additionally from Wales on the father's side and Ireland on the mother's side. Both sides of the family travelled to this country chasing gold, escaping impoverished lives of mining or share farming in their home countries. *Minjungbal* was not a word Sue learned until after she had finished her physical education teaching degree in Brisbane, Queensland, and postgraduate education studies (which included 'multicultural studies') and had started working in an Indigenous student support centre in a university. Working in this centre was integral to the research journey that unfolds in Scenario 2 in this account. It occurred to her one day, when co-teaching Indigenous Australian studies to undergraduate students, that no-one in her upbringing had ever thought it important to know the names of the traditional custodians of her hometown, not at school, not at home. Having previously completed a Master's thesis into curriculum decision-making, Sue decided that priorities in physical education were clearly centred around the lifeworld, experiences, ontologies and epistemologies of white, middle-class Australians. Her doctoral thesis explored how Indigenous communities negotiated this space to exercise their democratic rights of having a say over their own children's education.

Parlo Singh was born in the early 1960s in rural, Punjab India, a former colony of the British Empire, and migrated to Australia at a young age. She was educated in public primary and secondary schools in a small country town in Far North Queensland, Australia. In this place, the traditional custodians of the land are the *Gimuy-walubarra Yidi* people. It was uncommon for Asians to migrate to Australia in the 1960s as immigration was restricted predominantly to 'Whites' under the infamously named '*White Australia Policy*'. As a teacher-educator writing about the rise of racism against Asian and Aboriginal people in the 1990s, she wrote:

I still recall the names of my teachers, as well as many of the facts that I learnt in social studies. These facts included the narratives of famous white male explorers and pioneers such as Blaxland, Wentworth and Lawson; of Ned Kelly and other famous white outlaws or rebels who resisted the oppressive police state; and white women who undertook 'good works' such as Caroline Chisholm. .... Studies in history and geography during my secondary years of schooling wove the same white, masculine stories. I learnt about Greek and Roman men who were

depicted in textbooks and teachers' talk as the founders of 'our' great Western civilisation, and 'our' Western traditions (Singh, 1997: 11-12).

More recently, on returning to visit childhood friends and relatives in Far North Queensland, Parlo has learnt the Aboriginal names of places and Aboriginal stories of the mountains and waterways. These stories were suppressed in the 1960s and 1970s, and landscapes were often named after white men who claimed to have discovered them.

We three authors also identify as experienced teachers, all having taught within the school system in the state of Queensland, Australia. As educators and educational researchers, we're also very interested in the way Indigenous students and their extended communities experience the institution of schooling. We do not construct ourselves as experts on Indigenous education or as a voice for the experiences of Indigenous peoples, but rather as typical of 'well-intended but still needing to learn' mainstream Western educators working in contexts with Indigenous students. Our warrant for writing is tied to our identities as educators and educational researchers and the remit for educators to reflect on their practices and the communities that support them. This paper does not focus on our researcher positionality as a point of enquiry. Instead, like the work advanced by Delamont (2007, 2009), our concern is with research processes.

### **The ethical remit – researching *with* Indigenous participants**

In the Australian context, there are comprehensive guidelines for the ethical conduct of research involving humans. *The National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* is an evolving space, most recently updated in May 2015 (see National Health and Medical Research Council, 2015). The website advertises rolling reviews on an as-needed basis, rather than set review periods. Chapter 4.7 of the documentation is devoted to ethical considerations specific to working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2015). Other supporting documentation is listed, including *Values and Ethics: Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research* (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2003), *Keeping research on track: A guide for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples about health research ethics* (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2006) and the *Guidelines for Ethical Research in Indigenous Studies* (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2012).

As prominent Aboriginal health researcher Bronwyn Fredericks (2007:15) noted, such guidelines assist to serve the laying of a 'path' (structure or plan for the research) and 'way' (process) for enacting it – a relational, ethical, reciprocal, beneficent approach to inquiry *with* Indigenous peoples. These protocols are not intended to be optional extras for researchers; researchers must demonstrate them in the research plan in order to uphold the spirit and integrity of the research within an Indigenous community.

To assume the reflexive attitude of the title, according to Nilson (2017), we each need to search our own identities, our inherent cultural norms, contradictions and ambivalence with our own lives, our work and our ways of relating to others. Following advice from Delamont and Hamilton (1984:8), we do not 'ignore the temporal and spatial context in which the data are collected'. One way to reflexively think (Delamont, 2009) is to engage in internal and cross-dialogue, and in doing so, provide a critical focus on one's world view (see Bolton, 2010). We share some of that dialogue in the sections that follow.

### **Recount 1: Research into English grammar instruction at Tortol Island School**

Recount 1 is from Beryl's teacher/researcher study undertaken in a primary school in the Torres Strait Islands in 2008. Tortol Island (pseudonym) was a site for trialling some new grammar content that was to be introduced in the inaugural *Australian Curriculum English*. Beryl explored possibilities for working with this new grammar with remote multi-lingual Indigenous students. No such trialling had been undertaken and the outcomes of this project were deemed to be beneficial to curriculum implementers, teacher educators, and the Tortol Island community who would receive early access to this new curriculum content. In this way, the research was seen to genuinely benefit the Indigenous community.

Tortol Island hosted a small school with a couple of dozen students and 4 teachers. At the time Beryl started to communicate with the school, three of the teachers were Torres Strait Islanders (all graduates from mainstream Universities), and one was a mature age early career white Australian teacher. The three islander teachers were known to Beryl through a family contact. To provide more detail so the reader can better understand the relationship between Beryl, the family connection, and the three Islander teachers, and how an invitation to participate in research at Tortol Island was progressed, is to compromise the identities of the Tortol Island teachers, the students and the community. For this reason, public acknowledgement is, at best, general in nature. When the family contact heard about the proposed research, he phoned his family members on Tortol Island who were also representatives on the Tortol Island Community Council and were also able to brief the Tortol Island Major who agreed to sign a letter of introduction giving Beryl permission to visit the community as a teacher/researcher. The white Australian teacher was an undergraduate student in Beryl's tutorials for a number of years. Beryl talks about how the 'stars seemed to line up' and so many points of connection revealed themselves for the proposed research project.

There was sufficient interest in the proposed project from the four Tortol Island teachers and officials from the community, as well as the University. The interest from the island community stems from the teachers' and parents' interest in the English language proficiency of their students and educational projects that might be seen to benefit the students as they prepare to enter secondary school. Beryl applied to her University for research leave to travel to Tortol Island as a teacher/researcher. The *Australian Curriculum English* grammar project was deemed important from the University point of view, and leave from University teaching and funds to assist with transport costs were granted. In return, Tortol Island School provided access to the visiting teacher accommodation for Beryl. Yet, the Tortol Island teachers wanted to meet Beryl on-Country first before planning out the curriculum intervention. Beryl also wanted to know more about the students, their use of oral and written language and ways of using a grammatical metalanguage.

When all representatives were satisfied with the planning, Beryl prepared the paperwork for the University Ethics Committee. Beryl was employed at a Western University that required a full Ethics Committee Application because the research involved Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The full Committee Application required university templates to be completed for recruitment flyers and emails, and for demonstration consent forms, participant consent forms, and withdrawal of consent forms to be written in a standard language. This standard language was officious; each document was between one and two A4 pages. During the ethics application process, Beryl asked for permission to offer an alternative wording, one that was more appropriate to context and purpose that didn't forsake the consensual intent. Permission was denied; the only concession was that Beryl could verbally explain the information and consent forms, but the students and their parents/guardians would still be required to sign the consent forms prepared on the official University template. This meant the Tortol Island Representative voices were not a firm part of the application process, which compromised the tenets of respect, reciprocal negotiation and affirming community members as 'knowers' and involving Indigenous representatives from start to finish.

## **Recount 2: Research into Health Education at Bluewater School**

Recount 2 comes from Sue's doctoral research which examined health education at Bluewater School (pseudonym) in the Torres Strait, and how control was exercised in the development and implementation of health education learning experiences for Torres Strait Islander girls. It was a critically descriptive study about school and Indigenous community relations generally, and specifically, a single case of Torres Strait Islander community participation in health education decision-making for girls at the case study school. At the time of the research Sue was employed in an Indigenous student support unit at the same University where she was enrolled as a PhD candidate. She had applied to the University to be considered for the next work trip to the Torres Strait so she could also make enquires about undertaking field work in the Torres Strait Islands. This stage mirrored an important feature of critical ethnographic research, and Indigenous community research protocols (Donovan and Spark, 1997), in that the research agenda should be at least agreed to, if not determined, by the groups involved with the study, prior to the research being conducted.

To commence the planning for field work, Sue was introduced by a mutual Aboriginal colleague to the Brisbane Office Manager of the Queensland Indigenous Education Consultative Committee at a community function hosted by her work area. They discussed Sue's proposed research and Sue clarified the protocols associated with gaining permission to research within an educational setting in the Torres Strait. The Brisbane Office Manager confirmed Sue's understanding that the local branch of the Consultative Committee, Torres Strait Islanders Regional Education Committee (hereafter TSIREC), would need to be approached and that such an introduction to that committee would be best made by him. Sue was satisfied with the outcome of that first meeting, as the Manager appeared to be quite supportive. Sue chose not to give TSIREC the extensive university-required research proposal as she believed that the format of such a long document was not appropriate for the approval process. Rather there was a fine balance between simplifying the proposal to make it more readable and appealing to a community reader, and being too patronising by removing its detail. While asking the Manager for assistance with approaching TSIREC, Sue also asked for permission to invite another Consultative committee staff member to join a reference panel for her study. This request was aligned to ensuring that Indigenous representatives should be involved from start to finish. Doing so would assist with Sue's limited understanding of Torres Strait Islander culture, and to enhance community relevance of and control over her study.

Travelling with a Torres Strait Islander colleague from the Indigenous student support centre on this work trip proved to be fortuitous as an accommodation problem arose. This trip coincided with a two-yearly cultural festival in the Torres Strait. Sue and her colleague could only secure two nights of accommodation at one of the motels on the Island, leaving them with nowhere to stay for the remaining three nights. Sue's colleague's mother had travelled to the island in the previous year and re-established contact with her mother's childhood friend who still lived there. This family friend welcomed into her house both Sue and her colleague. A positive aspect of staying with a community member was that Sue and her colleague were removed from the cloistered walls of the major motel on the island. This motel generally housed all non-Indigenous visitors, including politicians, government officials and the media.

During a seminar at the school, Sue mentioned to one of the primary school administrators that she needed to get in touch with the Chairperson of TSIREC. Sue wished to make an appointment at a convenient time and place for the Chairperson to discuss the proposed research project. The Chairperson arrived in person twenty minutes later. Sue recounts that she had mentally prepared herself for an austere presentation, possibly inside a quiet office, but instead, ended up speaking to the Chairperson on the primary school grass lawn as children moved around and as the wind flapped the pages of her proposal. This meeting on the primary school front lawn was one of Sue's first

insights into Torres Strait Islanders' preference for action, rather than statements of intent (Sharp, 1997). The Chairperson asked Sue what she had already done on the proposal; Sue replied 'very little', reiterating her commitment to negotiating with community first. The Chairperson advised that Sue should submit her proposal to TSIREC, noting that a preliminary meeting had already taken place with the Chairperson, and that in principle, it sounded like something that TSIREC would support. Sue initiated the next step in the protocol process: to consult with the School Principal and the School Council of Bluewater School. The Principal agreed to take Sue's proposal to the next School Council meeting, with a view to seeking the Council's permission to carry out the research.

However, the approvals process was far from over. Education Queensland has its own internal research ethics department, which must appraise and approve all research proposals prior to researchers making contact with schools. Sue knew that she had breached their guidelines by approaching the community organisations and school first, but she believed that doing so was more culturally responsive. If Sue had approached the community organisations after receiving approval from the Department, the response may very well have been, 'Sorry, you didn't consult us first'. Indigenous communities have had so much research forced upon them without their approval (see Bainbridge, 2015), that most communities have reached the point of saying 'enough'. Sue's breach of this process was deliberate, but it still needed to be brought to the attention of the Education Queensland Research Ethics section. An Indigenous research officer appraised Sue's proposal and was highly responsive to the sequencing of events.

Sue called Bluewater School after receiving the formal permission from Education Queensland. The Principal mentioned that Bluewater School had already received over forty-five approved research proposals from various Education sectors. He also mentioned that of all the proposals received that year, only two had been approved by the School Council. The Principal advised that Sue's was one of the two approved projects. It had taken over eight months since the first meeting with the Consultative Committee Manager to receiving approval from the School. Proper protocol takes time.

On Sue's next trip to the Torres Strait, she assumed that she could start data collection. She was proven wrong on that account. There was still one important community group to be consulted and to provide approval: the Health Council. Health is such a culturally sensitive area, and one of great importance in the Torres Strait because of the complex issues impacting the Islander population. Consequently, the Health Council is a very significant community group with influence over a number of government delivery services, including education. Sue subsequently initiated contact with the District Office of Queensland Health to arrange interviews with health staff, but did not consider the existence of a consultative community group advising Queensland Health. Sue did not realise her error until speaking to one of the Islander teachers. The teacher asked Sue if she had secured Health Council permission to conduct the research and in the event that she hadn't, the teacher opted not to speak to Sue until permission had been granted.

Sue's attempts to secure a meeting with the Council Chairperson and the Manager of Torres Health, who was also Deputy Chairperson of the Council, had been unsuccessful. When Sue mentioned the difficulties in meeting with the members, particularly the Manager of Torres Health, the owner of the hostel mentioned that she knew the Manager had been away sick but that he was in his office that afternoon; she was his sister. Staying in the Islander hostel, as opposed to the non-Indigenous owned motel, made a tangible difference to progressing the research plan. Sue approached the Manager of Torres Health. He proceeded the meeting with an outline of the role of Torres Health and 'big picture' plans, in a non-committal way that would be appropriate for outsider educational officials. However, once they started to talk about colleagues in common, the manager warmed to the research intentions and gave a verbal undertaking to present the proposal to the Health Council.

When this would happen was unclear, but at least Sue had permission from him in his position as Torres Health Manager to approach and seek consent to interview his staff.

Sue also recalls a presentation to the full meeting of TSIREC. She viewed the presentation as an overview of her intended research plan, since the meeting was only one week into the field work. However, the Secretary to the committee advised that members would want to see progress and results, rather than intentions. The meeting was on Saturday, so Friday night was spent writing up preliminary findings from the first week of interviews. Even after just one week, the raw data was very interesting and prompted lively discussion among TSIREC members. Sue reflected, what she saw as part of 'commencing approval' protocol was viewed by the committee as 'ongoing approval' protocol. Sue reports this kind of feedback was the preferred method of TSIREC members being involved in the research from start to finish (Whatman, 2004).

### **Conclusion:**

This paper provided an account of our reflexive thinking (Delamont, 2009) about educational fieldwork as non-Indigenous researchers in Indigenous contexts. At a pragmatic level, we revisited (Delamont and Hamilton, 1984) research work undertaken separately by Beryl and Sue, casting a metaphoric 'mirror' that showcases what Delamont (2009:58) calls reflexive ethnography, 'where the scholar is studying a setting, a subculture, an activity or some actors *other than* herself, and is acutely sensitive to the interrelationship(s) between herself and the focus of the research'. At a descriptive level, our 'reflexive autobiographical writing on ethnography' (Delamont, 2009:58) has given attention to the hegemonic University Research Ethics policies and procedures, in particular their officious consent forms, sequencing dilemmas and the dilemma with confidentiality and acknowledgement. We also reflected on Sue's experience with being immersed in the social fabric of the research site and the implications for progressing the research. Sue's recount confirmed the unpredictableness of qualitative data collection and that issues of ethics can be a protracted process (Delamont, et al., 1997).

Our work here should not be construed as viewing such University Research Ethics as wholly negative. Our work indicates that 'social worlds do not come neatly packaged' (Delamont, et al., 1997:70). What is needed, however, is an epistemological reframing of western ethics policy and procedures to ensure that when Western researchers are engaged in research with Indigenous communities, a relational model of ethics underpins the practice. Our recounts hone in on the importance of the temporal and spatial contexts (Delamont and Hamilton, 1984) in which our data are collected. Kendall et al (2011) noted the significant progress in terms of shifting protocols and procedures for undertaking research in and with Indigenous communities in Australia, however, their claim that 'we have a long way to go in securing practices that fully acknowledge Indigenous ways of knowing and equality in research partnerships' still has relevance.

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