

## Critical Debates

### *Gang Wars of Central America: What Anthropologists Have to Say*

David Stoll

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Deborah T. Levenson, *Adiós Niño: The Gangs of Guatemala City and the Politics of Death*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013. Photographs, notes, bibliography, index, 200 pp.; hardcover \$84.95, paperback \$23.95.

Kevin Lewis O'Neill, *Secure the Soul: Christian Piety and Gang Prevention in Guatemala*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015. Illustrations, appendix, notes, bibliography, index, 304 pp.; hardcover \$85, paperback \$29.95, ebook \$29.95.

Elana Zilberg, *Space of Detention: The Making of a Transnational Gang Crisis Between Los Angeles and San Salvador*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. Notes, bibliography, index, 360 pp.; hardcover \$99.95, paperback \$27.95, ebook \$13.99.

How should we respond to the youth gangs of Central America? Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala are battered by some of the highest homicide rates on the planet. Many of the killers belong to two gang networks, Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and 18th Street, which originated in Los Angeles, California. Their record of inhumanity—gang rapes, initiation murders, decapitations, massacres of bus passengers—is astonishing. No one anticipated such mayhem when the Salvadoran and Guatemalan civil wars came to a negotiated end in the 1990s. Yet street gangs in these two countries and Honduras now take comparable numbers of victims, and they are turning extortion into a threatening new regime of taxation for all but the most elite and heavily guarded Central Americans.

In El Salvador, extortionists identifying with the two gangs have murdered more than 1,000 transport employees since 2004. Sixty to seventy thousand gang members are sharing extortion payments with at least half a million people—relatives, partners, and corrupt officials—according to Salvadoran authorities (*Economist* 2016). In and around Guatemala City, between 2006 and 2010, extortionists claiming to represent the two gangs murdered 630 bus drivers and 201 fare collectors (Valdez 2011). Just in 2014, for all of Guatemala, the death toll was 287 drivers of buses, taxis, and motorized three-wheelers (Rivera 2015).

Central Americans increasingly view the gangs as unstoppable; victims and witnesses are so afraid of reprisals that they refuse to cooperate with the police. At the

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David Stoll is a professor of anthropology at Middlebury College. [dstoll@middlebury.edu](mailto:dstoll@middlebury.edu)

U.S. border, fleeing from gangs and their demands has become a standard claim for Central Americans seeking asylum.

For anthropologists who wish to be in solidarity with the victims of capitalism, youth gangs are a compelling subject, because these are rebel youth bursting with defiance of the status quo. But if we wish to be in solidarity with the victims of capitalism, and if that requires distinguishing victims from victimizers, are these rebel youth not victimizers? For critical theorists—those who seek to explain sociocultural outcomes in terms of the structure of capitalism—the question is simplistic. Since everyone's choices are constrained by capitalism, demystifying its hegemonic discursive formations is our most important job. And so, fixating on gang violence—as do the media, politicians, and voters—is a misdirected moral panic that is being used to reinforce the power structure of neoliberal capitalism. According to this view, neoliberal logic requires a police state to discipline nonconformists, so gang youth are being scapegoated for wider social breakdowns. Instead of localizing violence in gangs, analysts should explain how deeper, structural forms of violence are being generated by neoliberal capitalist hegemony.

## IS “LAW AND ORDER” TO BLAME?

So argues Elana Zilberg in her influential *Space of Detention*. Zilberg came to the topic of gangs via immigrant rights activism with Salvadorans in Los Angeles. Salvadorans have been coming north for a long time, but in the 1980s the civil war between the state and a revolutionary movement multiplied the flow until over a million were in the United States. As an organizer of celebrity fundraisers, Zilberg became accustomed to presenting Salvadorans as refugees from a U.S.-backed dictatorship. So did the rest of the U.S. solidarity movement, with the result that, when Salvadorans were arrested for lack of legal status, their next logical step was to apply for political asylum. Unfortunately, most could not show that they were survivors of state repression, so their applications failed.

Next, solidarity activists asked the U.S. government to give Salvadorans the hazier status of sanctuary. Churches sheltered Salvadorans in their basements, lawyers pushed test cases through the courts, and the federal government responded with Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Salvadorans and other Central Americans. Unfortunately, the sanctuary movement could not protect TPS beneficiaries from the dog-eat-dog life of inner-city Los Angeles. Local labor markets were already flooded with undocumented immigrants from Mexico. Los Angeles was also the gang capital of the United States. And so Salvadoran youth in need of protection from Mexican and black aggressors organized gangs of their own.

Two events in 1992 persuaded U.S. authorities to speed up deportations of gang youth. One was a turf war between the mainly Salvadoran MS-13 and the mainly Mexican 18th Street for control of neighborhood drug sales. The other was the Rodney King riot. The same day that a white jury acquitted white police officers of assaulting black motorist Rodney King, rioters attacked passersby and looted stores. Other resi-

dents joined in. Soon it became apparent that many of the looters were Central Americans, Zilberg reports, and ultimately more of them were arrested than anyone else.

The millions of Angelenos who were frightened and angered by the Rodney King riots included many Mexican Americans. Unfairly, they found themselves lumped together with the looters. The Rodney King riots also increased the strife between black and Latino gangs. In Zilberg's view, however, media coverage of the riots was unnecessarily alarmist. What bothers her most is the judicial sequel. More than a thousand looters were deported back to their countries of origin before immigrant rights groups could intervene.

During this same period, in the early 1990s, homicide rates were escalating in El Salvador and Honduras, and soon in Guatemala as well. Central American politicians blamed deportees from the United States. MS-13 and 18th Street gang culture had been invented in Southern California, but in Central America it was now displacing earlier, less violent gang cultures. So by deporting immigrants with criminal records, was the United States exporting its culture of violence to Central America?

Elana Zilberg says yes, but the political scientist Thomas Bruneau and his collaborators, in a useful collection on the Central American gangs (2011), have their doubts. At the very least, according to Bruneau's contributors José Miguel Cruz and Floriana Cristiana Matei, the impact of migration to the United States and deportation back to Central America has been exaggerated. Yes, some deportees became respected figures in the Central American gang scene, but most did not become leaders, for reasons such as their poor command of Spanish. What did win the day is their cultural model, according to Bruneau's contributors Sonja Wolf and Elin Ranum—a model that would have become available in any case through media coverage and reverse migration back to Central America. For disenfranchised youth who wished to join the latest stage of consumer capitalism, but with no law-abiding way to earn the necessary income, gang fraternities offered excitement, power, and money.

Another step in Zilberg's argument is on firm ground—the role of get-tough mass detention policies in strengthening the gangs. In 1993 the Salvadoran government began copying the zero-tolerance approach that New York and other U.S. cities were adopting to stop crime waves. Advised by U.S. law enforcement gurus such as Rudolph Giuliani, the former New York mayor, Guatemala and Honduras followed suit. In Central America, the usual term for zero-tolerance crackdowns is *mano dura*. The iron fist approach included reinforcing the police with soldiers and criminalizing gang clothing and tattoos. Tens of thousands of suspects were corralled into prisons.

Unfortunately, mass detention backfired. As explained by sociologist Cruz in the Bruneau collection, “the simultaneous incarceration of thousands of youth gang members and wannabes” allowed different cliques of the same gang to become a “standing assembly in which they could debate, make pacts, and decide on structures” to be binding on all (Bruneau et al. 2011, 155). And so, as Zilberg and the Bruneau contributors agree, the zero-tolerance approach spread the gangs instead of curtailing them.

Zilberg's window on gang expansion is her research with Homies Unidos (united brothers), an organization of former MS-13 and 18th Street members. With considerable bravery, the Homies sought to broker truces between the two gangs in Los Angeles and San Salvador. When that proved impossible, the Homies helped disillusioned members exit their cliques without being killed for disloyalty. Acting as a halfway house, they redirected the rambunctious solidarity of gang life to non-violent ends.

Unfortunately, neither Los Angeles nor San Salvador provided much political space for good intentions. In both places, the cops decided that the Homies were a front for further depredation. Zilberg believes her friends were innocent, so she details many instances of police harassment. But the police were not the only problem the Homies faced, particularly in San Salvador, where their old allies and enemies continued to extort them. Some Homies were murdered by gangs and others by police death squads. Soon the organization had to be shut down and relaunched, this time under the control of professional social workers.

One limitation of gang research is that it is almost impossible to do participant observation with the more murderous cliques. They have too many secrets for which they could be indicted. Perhaps this wall of silence is why, although Zilberg tells us a lot about Homies Unidos and their activists, and although she shows how both the Homies and certain units of the Los Angeles Police Department mimic gangs in their personas and ethics, she tells us little about the gangs themselves. Thus *Space of Detention* ends up feeling a bit hollow, without a careful examination of the gangs themselves, of their record of violence, and of how this has been exaggerated—or not.

## IS THE GANG CRISIS JUST A HALL OF MIRRORS?

One anthropologist who succeeded in doing fieldwork with MS-13 cliques is T. W. Ward, in Los Angeles from 1993 to 2001, which was a less violent milieu than the Central American cities of today (Ward 2013). What Ward found was extremely decentralized. Since MS-13's famous code includes not taking orders from anyone, members were very resistant to any kind of organization. Cliques were intent on defending honor, not maximizing profit. Protecting boundaries was more important than trading across them to make money. Gang members were also far more interested in fighting rival gangs than fighting the police.

Like Ward, Zilberg has no time for conspiracy theories depicting gang members as supercriminals who run effective transnational networks. And so, like Ward, she regards gang identities as brands or trademarks. However, she is not hostile to other conspiracy theories, such as the possibility that the Salvadoran government's Súper Mano Dura policy is intended to increase violence rather than contain it, in order to turn the country into "a carceral and surveillance state" (200). Hence Zilberg's explanation for the gang scare, that it is ultimately a hall of mirrors in which the principal players are the U.S. and Salvadoran governments. When the civil war came to an end and the guerrilla movement was incorporated into electoral politics,

she argues, the U.S. and Salvadoran states lost their shared enemy of communism. Now they have found a new shared enemy in the gangs. Thus the gangs have become a scapegoat for all the structural violence wreaked by neoliberal capitalism. The two countries are “locked in a mirroring paranoid dynamic that served to reproduce old and new forms of violence” (243).

On the way to this conclusion, Zilberg grabs every opportunity to verticalize agency to the state. When she comes across a fast-food counter protected by a plexiglass cage, her explanation is that “development and policing have combined to control the spaces of consumption in this barrio and to order the act of consumption along acceptable paths of circulation” (96). It is the security logic of the system that explains the plexiglass, not local experience with robbery. What do the manager and employees have to say? Zilberg does not tell us. While she attends carefully to gang members as victims of police repression, victims of gangs receive less attention. By the end of her book, fear of MS-13 has become a product of media and political manipulation. Therefore the most important problem is not the gangs but the security state that seeks to stop them.

This moral and political stance is a Gramscian version of libertarianism: the state is always to blame, so citizens demanding protection from gangs have been duped by hegemony. To this Zilberg adds a Foucaultian preoccupation with surveillance. Yet if less policing is the solution, wouldn't Central America be on the mend because its security forces have such obvious limitations in surveilling and controlling their citizenry? Indeed, if neoliberal capitalism is to blame for the surge in gang violence, then it stands to reason that liberation from neoliberalism, such as the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela, led by President Hugo Chávez for 14 years, would make some headway against assaults, extortions, and homicides. Yet crime rates soared under this alternative to neoliberal capitalism, and Venezuela trails only Honduras for the highest homicide rate on the planet. Evidently the reasons for gang violence cut deeper than neoliberal mirroring between the United States and Central America.

Even as scholars like Zilberg seek to explain gangs as a consequence of state repression, Central American voters blame them on longstanding deficiencies in their police forces and judiciaries. Broadly speaking, they blame gangs on a lack of repression. Strong, consistent popular support for the iron fist is a dilemma for scholars who define our research in terms of solidarity with the people. When delinquent youth kill each other, and when afflicted neighbors lynch gang suspects, which side is the people's side? Tit-for-tat violence in the working class upsets the solidarity platform because one kind of victim is victimizing another kind of victim.

Solidarity with the poor defines Deborah Levenson's *Adiós Niño*. Levenson is an oral historian who does fieldwork; her first research with gang members was in 1987, and she now refers to them nostalgically as “gangs to live for.” Thirty years ago, she reports, gang youth were communicative and intellectually curious. Most were on the run from family patriarchs who were irresponsible, alcoholic, or violent. Many had supportive relationships with maternal grandmothers, who were filling in for mothers who had gone north to work in the United States. But their *familia* was

now the *mara*, a Central American expression for gangs, and they often used the two terms interchangeably. The *mareros* whom Levenson met all had jobs, but they enhanced their low wages with robberies. Some claimed that they targeted fat cats rather than their fellow poor. Levenson thought that the violence they caused was being exaggerated.

When Levenson returned to the gang scene in the late 1990s, she expected to confirm that fear of it was being drummed up by the usual combo of media sensationalism and right-wing demagoguery. But a new generation of gang members brought her up short. Crack addiction and homicides were soaring; gang rivalries turned neighborhoods into war zones. Many residents fled; property values collapsed. Gang members were now afraid to tell Levenson their personal stories, but as far as she could tell, class analysis had almost vanished from their outlook. The supreme good was now killing members of other gangs, producing what Levenson calls “gangs to die for.” Some gang members had indigenous features and Mayan surnames, but none claimed an indigenous identity; they just wanted to be *mareros*.

As do other solidarity scholars in Guatemala, Levenson mourns the social democracy of the 1940s and 1950s, the urban left of the 1960s and 1970s, and the guerrilla movement of the 1980s. She would like to draw a causal arrow from civil war to gang war, from the brutality of state security forces against guerrilla supporters to the brutality of the gangs. And so, like Zilberg, she seeks every opportunity to verticalize the responsibility for gang depredations to the state; in particular, to Guatemala’s powerful army. But this interpretation is undercut by the chronology of events. It is true that the Guatemalan civil war pushed refugees into the precarious neighborhoods of the nation’s capital, encouraging some youth to join gangs. But after the height of army repression in the period 1980–83, what should pop up but the relatively nonviolent, cheerful, intellectually curious “gangs to live for” that Levenson found in 1987. Only in the following decade, during the political opening of the 1990s, do “gangs to die for” take over. If army repression did not turn survivors into “gangs to die for,” why would it have this effect on survivors’ children? Evidently something other than state repression is driving Guatemala’s lethal gang scene.

## GOVERNMENTALITY VS GOVERNABILITY: HOW ABOUT BOTH?

In the anthropology of Latin America, any discussion of the state now seems to run through Michel Foucault’s concept of governmentality. Yet governmentality requires a level of efficacy and compliance that Central America’s underfunded, ramshackle state apparatuses usually seem to lack. Oddly, the almost superhuman capacity for tracking down and terrorizing opponents that Foucaultian theorists would like to attribute to the state is, for Central Americans, an attribute of the MS-13 and 18th Street networks. Even more oddly, while Central Americans blame gang extortion rackets for reshaping their lives, I do not know of any researcher who has analyzed their perceptions in terms of governmentality or hegemony. However, one obvious candidate for governmentality does thrive in Central America, amid all

the criminal rackets and under the shaky authority of the state. I refer to Central America's burgeoning Evangelical Protestant churches.

These strongholds of admonition were explored by Kevin O'Neill in his 2010 ethnography of a Pentecostal megachurch in Guatemala City. Such churches invest in nonstop moralism, the prosperity gospel, and quasi-political campaigns for Christian citizenship. They believe that, as O'Neill puts it, they can pray, fast, and think a new and better Guatemalan society into existence (2010, 30, 67). Curiously, such hopes parallel what critical theorists have to offer us politically: that if we can deconstruct hegemonic discursive formations, the authority of these formations will be undermined, creating room for the construction of a better society.

Now O'Neill has published a second ethnography well worth reading, of ex-gang members in Guatemala City. Like James Smith in *Email from Ngeti* (2014), O'Neill operates as confessor to young men who share their misfortunes with him. They have been in prison, or have been deported from the United States, or struggle with addiction to crack cocaine. They seek to escape these dilemmas by becoming born-again Christians. So they cycle through prison ministries, drug rehabilitation centers, corporate call centers, and child sponsorship programs, each governed by the Evangelical Christian formula of "piety and prevention."

O'Neill is on the hunt for surveillance and governmentality, but he acknowledges that Guatemalan prisons are far from total institutions. Unlike Jeremy Bentham's proverbial panopticon, officialdom pays little attention to a prisoner once he is in the slammer. Since administration is haphazard, the crucial intermediaries between prisoners and prison officials are Guatemala's Evangelical pastors, who hope to turn gang members into self-governing subjects who can step back from violence.

For O'Neill, this recreates the panopticon inside a person's soul, and it usually fails to deliver the promised results. Consider a business start-up financed by the U.S. Agency for International Development. Since steady jobs are scarce for ex-gangsters, five such individuals are selected to start a shoeshine stand, while another five are selected to start a carwash. To disseminate the happy results, the two microbusinesses are turned into a reality television show. To keep the audience engaged, actual shining of shoes and washing of cars receives less airtime than heavily subsidized visits to boutiques and restaurants, during which the ten beneficiaries must express, not just their gratitude, but their transformation into born-again Christians. "Clothing, cuisine, and confession" (84) is O'Neill's term for this cruel mismatch between upper-class consumption and lower-class wages. Once the show ends, so do the subsidies, and both businesses fail. Since then, he believes, six of the ten beneficiaries have been killed.

Another illustration of O'Neill's Evangelical panopticon are corporate call centers, a flourishing industry in these parts, which welcome U.S. deportees because of their near-native English and which also pay relatively good wages. In one incident, two ex-gang members disrespect each other at a work station. Instead of attacking each other on the spot, they consult their agendas to schedule a secret fistfight in the men's room. Once the score is settled, preserving honor on both sides, they return to their work stations.

Call centers require rigorous time management and unflappable politeness, neither of which comes easily to young men prone to rebellion, so this kind of job turns into what O'Neill calls pious life coaching. Not everyone can adjust to the new regime. Thus Mario's career as an English-speaking corporate employee is cut short by his first paycheck, which he blows on drugs. O'Neill follows him all the way down, into near-serfdom on a coffee plantation and then to a grim detox center.

O'Neill's chapter about detox centers is like an Edgar Allan Poe story about grave robbing—except that the bodies are still alive, addicted, and out on the streets. Homeless addicts are kidnapped by Evangelical *grupos de cacería* (hunting groups), then imprisoned in tough-love regimes from which no legal authority is likely to liberate them. Some of O'Neill's most hair-raising stories would benefit from corroboration, but he fulfills the critical test of good ethnography by providing enough perplexing information for readers to come to different conclusions if they wish. For example, it is typically the families of addicts who hire detox centers to snatch them from likely death on the streets. In Javier's case, he is captured by Evangelicals hired by his own mother—but only after Javier strips her home to pay for drugs and then sells her front door, in a dangerous neighborhood overrun by crack addicts like him.

There is no alternative to Evangelical detox centers, O'Neill concedes; state hospitals have degenerated into bedlams that are even more unpredictable and dangerous. Judging from his stories, gang prevention programs have sprung up like mushrooms not just because evangelists have hegemonic visions, and not just because international funding is available, but because addicts, their families, and neighborhoods are desperate for protection from human predators. They are desperate for a restoration of order. That the available solutions are clumsy, and might even make the situation worse, does not refute the need for emergency intervention.

O'Neill does a wonderful job of humanizing delinquent youth. He does not play them up as victims or downplay how they victimize others. He is also candid about how their conclusions differ from his own: while he wishes to convince his readers that evangelical piety is the latest stage of governmentality, Mateo hopes we will be touched by the Holy Spirit. And while O'Neill believes that Javier's problem is the Evangelical detox center in which he is a virtual prisoner, Javier believes his problem is addiction to crack. This is an interesting collision between the moralism of Guatemalans and the moralism of libertarian researchers. Would it be fair to say that while Foucaultians think Guatemala's problem is governmentality—that is, a regime of surveillance and control that constrains human freedom—Guatemalans think their problem is a lack of governability—that is, their current level of interpersonal violence and the potential for more?

Anyone who does research on delinquent youth has a moral project, whether or not they realize it, and O'Neill seems to realize this. But while he ridicules the Evangelical moral project for being paternalistic and discriminatory, his own moral project eludes me, let alone suggestions about what might work better. O'Neill does not want the Guatemalan state, aid projects, and Evangelicals offering gang youth the exit of a religion-based regime of governmentality because that makes it easier to dismiss other, more dihard gang members as irretrievably damned. But he is



indignant when USAID stops funding this kind of effort. When defunded clients are subsequently murdered, mainly by old gang enemies, USAID is responsible—but for what? Suddenly, in O'Neill's view, USAID, the security industry, and the Guatemalan state are “letting die a generation of criminalized and utterly unemployable men” (189). Which they should have prevented by doing exactly what?

In his earlier book about a Pentecostal megachurch hoping to transform Guatemalan society, O'Neill showed that leaders were teaching followers to use prayer as a substitute for social and political mobilization. Unfortunately, while Evangelicals have a plausible game plan for personal transformation, they have yet to produce one for social and political change. Each of Guatemala's three outspokenly Evangelical presidents since 1982 has disgraced himself and his religion. Equally unfortunate, judging from O'Neill's analysis of the options for ex-gang members, is that liberals and progressives cannot do a whole lot, either. Any effort to channel youth toward religious or civic ideals can only reflect the nefarious machinations of governmentality.

## **GANGS AND EVANGELICAL CHURCHES: WHAT DO THEY SHARE?**

Homicidal youth gangs pose such a challenge, to every conceivable scheme of social improvement, that perhaps only people who think they have God on their side are willing to invest their lives in responding to them. O'Neill is one of several researchers (Brenneman 2012; Smilde 2007; Wolseth 2011) to burrow into the strange affinity between youth gangs and Evangelical Protestantism. How could churchly submission to authority be a secret sharer with adolescent rebellion? It turns out that both Evangelical congregations and gangs conceive of themselves as families for their members. Both ennoble suffering and, through the mystique of blood sacrifice, translate it into solidarity. They are both powerful generators of agency—or at least the belief that one has it.

In the Christian scheme, only victims who take responsibility for at least part of what happens to them can create the room necessary to define choices. This may sound like a quaint notion, but it is what young Evangelical converts tell O'Neill (21–22), and it is not confined to Christianity: the Vodoun priestess in Karen McCarthy Brown's *Mama Lola* (2015) operates on the same principle. It is the Evangelical requirement that gang members accept blame, that they make public confessions, and that they undergo weekly theatrics of submission that, paradoxically, enable them to believe that they can steer away from gang life. Could this ability to generate feelings of agency be why Evangelicals often have a more energetic response to gangs than anyone else?

One guardedly hopeful assessment of gang exit has been provided by the sociologist Edward Orozco Flores (2014). It is important that Orozco did his research in Los Angeles, where there is a better chance of escaping reprisals and exiting into a stable job than in Central America. Using Elizabeth Brusco's 2010 analysis of Evangelical patriarchy as a way to reformulate family-hostile machismo into a more

family-friendly version of male dominance, he argues that a “reformed barrio masculinity” enables former gang members to uphold their masculine identities and to channel these in a way that supports their partners and children. They can still look and act like gang members, minus the destruction. This enables them to “mature out of gang lifestyle through employment and parenthood.” Thus a way out of gang life is provided by Evangelical uplift, family metaphors, and—last but not least—jobs paying meaningful wages.

Zilberg, Levenson, and O’Neill have gotten close to gangs, and each of their ethnographies conveys a social depth that can be lacking in political science and criminology. But they have chosen theoretical and political agendas that rob meaningful choices from gang members, who are completely trapped by governmentality. Zilberg, Levenson, and O’Neill also seem to belittle the incremental improvements that can come from steady application of discipline and principle. What Guatemalans call little by little (*poco a poco*) may not seem like much, but in many eras this has been their only credible option.

Regardless of who wins the next election in Central America or what the United States does next, thousands more Central Americans will continue to die from gang violence. Most gang members will be killed not by cops or lynch mobs but by each other. They and their victims are the open veins of Central America. Perhaps this is a good moment for anthropologists to acknowledge that for all our skill in analyzing power structures, our deployment of Gramsci and Foucault tends to breed hopeless determinism. Perhaps it is also a good moment to open our ears to Christian moralists, to listen to their ideas about protecting society from the false promises of what they call Mammon and what we call global capitalism. How to provide decent jobs and pathways to fulfillment, without fueling yet more delusion and violence, is the toughest question of all.

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