

**Building Afro-indigenous affective networks:  
women, education, and activism in Latin  
America**

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**Summary**  
Social movements and grassroots organizations led by indigenous and afro-descendant women in Latin America play a central role in defending human and civil rights, highlighting territorial and environmental rights, supported by black, indigenous, and various branches of Latin American feminism. This article highlights the contributions of four women active in the struggles for gender equality and full access to public policies for inclusive and liberating education. The conversations took place in the second panel of the international seminar “Indigenous and Afro-descendant Peoples in the Americas: Collaboration, Archaeology, Repatriation, and Cultural Heritage”, on the theme “Building Afro-Indigenous Affective Networks: Women, Education, and Activism in Latin America”, with central objectives to: (1) create learning spaces that respect indigenous and afro-descendant narratives and ways of transmitting knowledge through orality; (2) strategies to transform formal education through the inclusion of linguistic diversity and methodologies that promote freedom of thought; (3) strengthen female solidarity initiatives. The “affective networks” among women are at the center of social transformation at the national and global levels and should be considered by community archaeologies.

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The Urgent Anthropology section consists of articles in the form of short essays on key subjects within the dual scope of an anthropology of urgency and an anthropology of affections, but also those that mark public agendas or explore invisibilised realities and phenomena.

Social movements and grassroots organizations led by indigenous and afro-descendant women in Latin America play a central role in defending human and civil rights, highlighting territorial and environmental rights, supported by black, indigenous, and various branches of Latin American feminism. This article highlights the contributions of four women active in the struggles for gender equality and full access to public policies for inclusive and liberating education. The conversations took place in the second panel of the international seminar "Indigenous and Afro-descendant Peoples in the Americas: Collaboration, Archaeology, Repatriation, and Cultural Heritage", on the theme "Building Afro-Indigenous Affective Networks: Women, Education, and Activism in Latin America", with central objectives to: (1) create learning spaces that respect indigenous and afro-descendant narratives and ways of transmitting knowledge through orality; (2) strategies to transform formal education through the inclusion of linguistic diversity and methodologies that promote freedom of thought; (3) strengthen female solidarity initiatives. The "affective networks" among women are at the center of social transformation at the national and global levels and should be considered by community archaeologies.

"When we join in solidarity with indigenous peoples, we find lifeways similar to ours. We find relationships with nature similar to ours. There was a great confluence in manner and thoughts. And it has strengthened us. We made a great cosmological alliance, even speaking different languages." Antonio Bispo dos Santos (2020)

## Introduction

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 [9] António Bispo dos Santos (1959-2023) was born in the Vale do Rio Berlingas, Piauí, Brazil. He was trained by the educators of the Quilombo Saco-Curtume, in the municipality of São João do Piauí. He is the author of articles, poems, and the book *Colonização, Quilombos: modos e significações* (2015). As a Quilombola

"Building Afro-Indigenous Affective Networks: Women, Education, and Activism in Latin America" is the second panel of the international seminar "Indigenous and Afro-descendant Peoples in the Americas: Collaboration, Archaeology, Repatriation, and Cultural Heritage" (2023/2024), a collaboration between academic institutions in Brazil and the United States: the Interdisciplinary Laboratory of Research in Evolution, Culture, and Environment (LEVOC/MAE/University of São Paulo), the Latin American Historical Archaeology Laboratory, and the New England Indigenous Archaeology Laboratory (department of Anthropology, University of Massachusetts Boston).

The conversation featured speakers: Catarina Nimbopyruá Delfina dos Santos (Tupi Guarani, TI Pyátsagwêra, São Paulo, Brazil), Maria Celeste Sánchez Sugia (Mexico City, Mexico), Katherine Chala (ancestral Afro-Ecuadorian territory, Chota Valley, Ecuador), Watatakalu Yawalapiti (Yawalapiti/Xingu, Brazil), and was mediated by Valentina Romero, an anthropologist, and descendant of the Muysca diaspora in the Saquencipá Valley, Boyacá, in the Andean region of Colombia. The final comments were by Maria John (Japan) (2019), a professor in the department of History and director of the Native American and Indigenous Studies Program (University of Massachusetts, Boston) (map 1).



- leader, he worked in the State Coordination of Quilombola Communities of Piauí (CECOQ/PI) and the National Coordination of Articulation of Rural Black Quilombola Communities (CONAQ). He stands out for his political and militant action, which is strongly related to his Quilombola training, evidenced by his commitment to the cause for which the peoples fight, in defense of their traditional territories, symbols, meanings, and ways of life." (See: Encyclopedia of Anthropology, University of São Paulo, accessed on July 8, 2024: <https://ea.flich.usp.br/autor/antonio-bispo-dos-santos>)  
 [10] Available at: <https://youtubehttps://youtube.com/playlist?list=PL3QczBZ6WxxbaUfogyYBadLjdTouaLWocsi=6dZatsBPamEOPG1H> (last access July 2024).  
 [11] Terra Indígena do Xingu, acesso: [https://www.instagram.com/mulheres\\_do\\_xingu/](https://www.instagram.com/mulheres_do_xingu/)  
 [12] Articulação Nacional de Mulheres Indígenas Guerreiras da Ancestralidade, acesso: <https://anmiga.org/marcha-das-mulheres/>  
 [13] [http://conamune.atspace.org/es\\_quienes\\_somos](http://conamune.atspace.org/es_quienes_somos).  
 [14] Turtle Island, from Indigenous oral histories, refers to North America (Snyder 1974), while Abya Yala, meaning "maturing land" in the Kuna language, is used in Indigenous activism for the American continent, particularly Latin America; both terms challenge colonial names and may sometimes be used interchangeably to refer to Indigenous ancestral territories in the Americas.  
 [15] Epistemological frameworks rooted in colonial thought have historically justified oppressive systems, like racialized caste hierarchies, by valuing the knowledge of colonizers over that of



48.000 47.000 46.000 45.000 44.000 43.000 42.000 41.000 40.000 39.000 38.000 37.000 36.000 35.000 34.000 33.000 32.000 31.000 30.000 29.000 28.000 27.000 26.000 25.000 24.000 23.000 22.000 21.000 20.000 19.000 18.000 17.000 16.000 15.000 14.000 13.000 12.000 11.000 10.000 9.000 8.000 7.000 6.000 5.000 4.000 3.000 2.000 1.000 0.000 -1.000 -2.000 -3.000 -4.000 -5.000 -6.000 -7.000 -8.000 -9.000 -10.000 -11.000 -12.000 -13.000 -14.000 -15.000 -16.000 -17.000 -18.000 -19.000 -20.000 -21.000 -22.000 -23.000 -24.000 -25.000 -26.000 -27.000 -28.000 -29.000 -30.000 -31.000 -32.000 -33.000 -34.000 -35.000 -36.000 -37.000 -38.000 -39.000 -40.000 -41.000 -42.000 -43.000 -44.000 -45.000 -46.000 -47.000 -48.000

Map 1. Speaker's places of origin. Elaborated by Danielle Samia.

the colonized, thereby dehumanizing and disenfranchising marginalized groups under the guise of progress, capital, and production. (See Tuhiwai Smith 2021 p. 67-79).

The panel was coordinated by two Latin American researchers: Marianne Sallum, who studies communities of women potters and agroforestry populations in São Paulo, Brazil (Sallum and Noelli 2021); Daniela Balanzátegui (Balanzátegui *et al.* 2021), who through community archaeology collaborates with Afro-Ecuadorian cimarrona women in historical reparation. Additionally, Stephen W. Silliman, who conducts collaborative archaeological research with the Eastern Pequot in Connecticut, USA, contributing to territorial recognition demands (Silliman 2008), and Astolfo Araujo, a researcher on the occupation of Southeastern Brazil by the first human groups to arrive in the Americas (Araujo *et al.* 2018).

We recognize and honor the lands of the Massachusett people, where the University of Massachusetts, Boston, is located, and the neighboring Nipmuc and Wampanoag communities, as well as the Tupi, Tupiniquim, and Kaingang peoples, where the University of São Paulo is located, and the ancestral territories of our speakers and moderators: the Tupi Guarani of São Paulo, the Yawalapiti in the Xingu Indigenous Park, the African diaspora in Mexico and Ecuador, and the territories of the Muysca descendants in Colombia.

This panel is dedicated to the memory of thinker Antônio Bispo dos Santos.<sup>[9]</sup> His early departure leaves a void, but his legacy as a thinker of afro-indigenous interactions guides and inspires this event and new generations of students and thinkers of decolonization (Santos 2015, 2019, 2020).

Over 532 years, interactions have had various entanglements and confluences arising from personal and/or collective relationships through alliances, kinships, exchanges, intimacies, and conflicts. However, the silencing of indigenous and afro-descendant histories by colonial bureaucracy has multidirectional effects on society, perpetuating inequalities in rights and full citizenship in the Americas, especially for women.

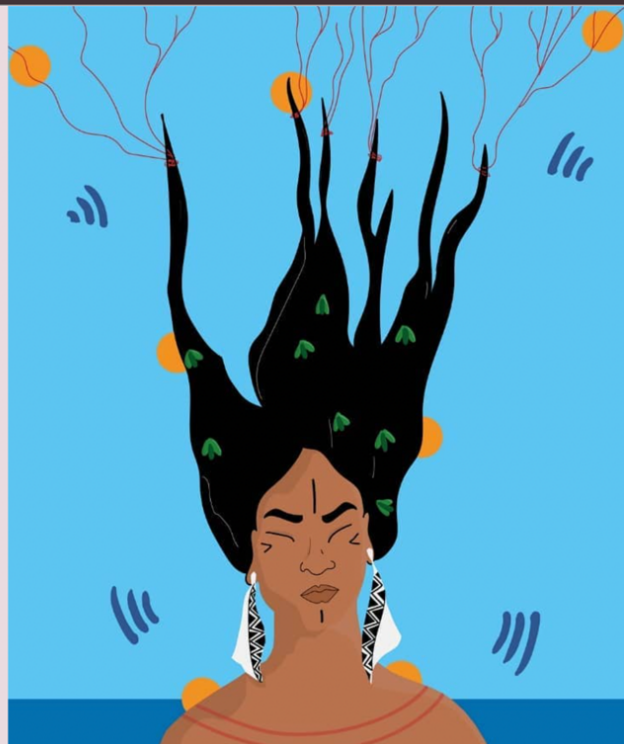




Figure 1 - Playing in the Waters, Yacunā Tuxá (2021)

Afro-indigenous interactions are framed in two definitions:

**1. Definition of confluence:** based on Santos (2019), it describes the relationship between indigenous and afro-descendant peoples marked by the exchange of perceptions based on plurality and ancestral genealogies, while preserving their differences.

**2. Definition of solidarity:** based on Krenak (2015: 152), it establishes that indigenous societies are alliance societies *par excellence* in relation to life and the understanding of the world, "but they must be thought of very carefully, as they are not societies that accept the erasure of their identity in the world, nor the formation of a homogeneous group".

Thus, confluence and solidarity have nothing to do with national hegemonic discourses, nor with multiculturalism proposals, nor with whitening and mestizaje policies (Rahier 2022; Cruz 2021). These are perspectives that must be understood locally, in the contexts of global phenomena. The struggles against colonialists for full civil rights and gender equality are urgent issues for indigenous and afro-descendant women's movements in Latin America and beyond, especially in the current contexts of war and climate catastrophe, where violence against women and children is a deeply rooted tactic. In such circumstances, this seminar establishes platforms for intercultural collaboration, strengthening ties between communities and academia to reflect on common interests against racism and gender violence. This is presented by one of our panelists, María Celeste Sánchez Sugía, an Afro-Mexican senator:

"Our resistance and resilience show that we have not disappeared, even though they tried to erase us from textbooks and history. They never included our names in the places we helped build, but we are still here with 2.5 million people. We have a resilient Afro-Mexican movement and are joining forces with scholars and allies. Now, we are building a collective effort with Indigenous peoples, as many of them have also been ignored, and our collective history between Africa, Mexico, and Indigenous communities has been erased."

This platform is rooted in ancestral female practices of maintaining solidarity networks of exchange, food sovereignty, and oral transmission of knowledge between generations, reaffirming acts of resistance by women (Benites 2021), which resonate with the reflections of indigenous women in Brazil and Afro-Ecuadorian women on local education processes:

Catarina Nimbopyruá Delfina dos Santos (2023):<sup>[10]</sup>

"I was the only one in my village who had completed secondary education and spoke the native language. I was chosen by the community to take the indigenous teaching course and the pedagogy faculty. I learned within four walls and did not want that for my students. I wanted them to be free. For 12 years, I worked as a teacher for the Brazilian state. My supervisor and the education department did not accept that I taught students based on experience with nature. They said I couldn't go against them because I was just an employee. So, I quit my job because what really mattered to me was the well-being of the children so they could grow up as warriors of nature."

Katherine Chala (2024, in this panel):

"The idea is to look at the maroon communities to understand how we can build free societies. In this sense, we have the Center for Research on African and Afro-American Studies – the first in Ecuador, at least in higher education at the undergraduate level, connected to a formal intercultural



university and mainly comprised of young afro-descendant women. This center is perhaps the crystallized dream of our closest ancestors. Therefore, in this space, we collect, analyze, and revalue the knowledge and learnings from this long-term struggle in our communities to be able to document them and effectively establish a research center with its own ontology and epistemologies that address the political, cultural, social, and economic aspects of the African diaspora in the Americas and Sub-Saharan Africa. Likewise, it aims to make visible and dignify the contributions of afro-descendant people, who have built their knowledge over centuries and have transmitted it orally from generation to generation."

Watatakalu Yawalapiti (2024, in this panel):

"I was a child, but I was already a voice for my people, and I always wanted other women, other girls, to have the same voice and be taught to be leaders. That is why, as I grew older, I actively joined the efforts of other regional and national leaders to promote female empowerment among Indigenous communities. In different territories, I saw indigenous women being sidelined because sometimes men want to silence female voices. We know that women back home have a voice, but with non-indigenous culture impacting our territories, we are often treated as if we should not be heard... Currently, we have the Women's Movement of the Indigenous Territory of Xingu (MMTIX) with leaders from all the territories that are part of our movement."

As archaeologists involved in collaborative community initiatives, guided by a feminist perspective, we recognize the importance of building bridges between the traditional knowledge of indigenous and afro-descendant women and archaeology for more democratic and horizontal access to research and knowledge dialogue. This includes community-driven partnerships to define an active archaeology that allows people to tell their stories (Laluk *et al.* 2022; Tuxá *et al.* 2024; Romero *et al.* 2024) and that effectively works towards a pedagogy of decolonization (Atalay 2008).

Social movements and grassroots organizations led by indigenous and afro-

descendant women in Latin America play a central role in the continuity of solidarity strategies, the preservation of traditional practices, and the care and cultivation of forests (Guajajara and Xakriabá *apud* McNee 2021; Guarani 2022 [2020]), forming the basis of black, indigenous, and Latin American feminism. These women are present in various political institutions and both national and international organizations, such as the United Nations and their local governments and executive-legislative powers. They also promote the ATIX-Woman Project,<sup>[11]</sup> the March of Indigenous Women in Brazil,<sup>[12]</sup> and the National Coordinator of Black Women of Ecuador,<sup>[13]</sup> to name a few examples.

These are effective and indispensable efforts in the ongoing struggles to promote gender equality, economic and environmental justice, prevent the historical violence of race, gender, and class, build and establish access to inclusive and liberating education policies. These issues are at the heart of social transformations occurring in different countries, territories and communities on the global stage, highlighting the need to include these topics in national and international forums, including Humanities and Archaeology production.

First and foremost, the speakers also point out the recognition of political actions and the construction of historical memories that emerge at the center of *praxis* as part of emancipatory ancestry. As the Afro-Ecuadorian feminist researcher and anti-racist activist Génesis Anagonó (2023: 68) writes, this memory brings with it a path for the dignification of descendants, for the reparation and healing of ancestral pains, as it establishes chronological connections between the past and the present, allowing "collective and individual memory to be rewritten in the body and reaffirmed in the territory they occupy".

#### Seminar/debate

In this section, we present an audiovisual summary of the panelists' interventions after a briefly introducing each of them.

**Katherine Chalá**, an anthropologist with a master's in Negotiation and International Cooperation who maintains a decolonial and anti-racist agenda in

favor of human rights and the demands of afro-descendants. She is currently responsible for directing the first Center for African and Afro-American Studies in Ecuador at the undergraduate level, affiliated with the Intercultural University of Nationalities and Indigenous Peoples Amawtay Wasi. She is a member of the Black Family Research Center and the Federation of Black Communities and Organizations of Imbabura and Carchi.

**María Celeste Sánchez Sugía**, a psychologist and Ph.D. student in Biomedical Sciences (National Autonomous University of Mexico - UNAM), is a leader in defending the rights of afro-descendant and migrant people, integrating the gender equity commissions of the Institute of Anthropological Research (UNAM) and the Somos Listas collective. In 2018, she became the first Afro-Mexican woman to join the Senate, promoting various actions to raise awareness of Afro-Mexican populations.

**Catarina Nimbopyruá Delfina dos Santos**, leader of Aldeia Tapirema (Tupi Guarani Piaçaguera Indigenous Land, São Paulo, Brazil). Has intercultural higher education from the University of São Paulo. She is a pioneering activist in the indigenous movement at state and national levels, notably in indigenous education, having served as deputy director and teacher. As an educator, she seeks alternatives to build schools aligned with the demands of community strengthening.

**Watatakalu Yawalapiti**, is a Yawalapiti Leader of the upper Xingu basin, coordinator of Atix Mulheres, and member of the Women's Movement of the Xingu Indigenous Territory. She is a co-founder of the ANMIGA collective and shelters for women in her territory, working to fight against sexist practices rooted in local customs and to strengthen the culture and history of her people.

Video 1 – Valentina Romero



<https://youtu.be/MxmmJsUIPaI?feature=shared>

Video 2 – Katherine Chalá



<https://youtu.be/La0fbMPzXvg?feature=shared>



## Video 3 – María Celeste Sánchez Sugía



<https://youtu.be/twIHRea3Ai0?feature=shared>

## Video 4 – Catarina Nimbopyruá Delfina dos Santos



<https://youtu.be/wMsXXMk2BrI?feature=shared>

## Video 5 – Watatakalu Yawalapiti



<https://youtu.be/8gnoqEk4Ehs?feature=shared>

## Moderator's reflections

## Valentina Romero

In Abya Yala/Turtle Island,<sup>[14]</sup> indigenous, afro-descendant, and peasant populations are in tension with the nation-states, which have sought to erase our identities, ancestral practices, and relationships with our territories to promote their notions of progress through multiple axes of homogenizing and racist violence. Systematic human rights violations are numerous in our histories, but as the panelists of this event demonstrated, our struggle to improve our identities and protect our body-territories from material, cultural, and spiritual extraction also abound. In this ancestral struggle, women are central, from everyday life to public and legislative spaces, raising and liberating our voices to protect life in our communities. Spaces like this break imposed borders, demonstrating that collective liberation is alive and transnational. Those who inhabit academic

environments have the duty to reform oppressive colonial epistemologies and,[15] through collective work, germinate historical reparations to cultivate a humane, diverse, and dignified present and future.

#### Final comments

##### María John

I don't see my job here to be having the final word, more so amplifying and underscoring the lessons, calls to action, and urgency of the many things shared today. I want to begin by acknowledging how inspiring it has been to see a centering of indigenous and afro-descendant women's experiences and their labor, which especially in academic spaces often goes unnoticed, unrecognized, unengaged, or else gets co-opted into and claimed by others or by institutions. When I was invited to be part of this conversation, I was introduced the idea of the panel by reflecting on how so much of the activism and labor of women, especially afro-descendants and indigenous women, gets marginalized or missed altogether in representations, histories, and narratives about activist work. This is partly due to the dominance of English within academic publishing which contributes to the marginalization of voices. It's worth pointing out that even in the form this panel takes with its simultaneous translation, what we've witnessed today is an example of how we can do better within institutions of learning, to step outside of structures and modalities that are inherently reinforcing colonial or other forms of domination and exclusion. Even if this is something as foundational as engaging in a different language. As several of our panelists noted, indigenous and afro-descendant women have always, historically and today, been doing the work of activism for their communities, often without much support or recognition, sometimes even under threat to their safety. Our panelists have also reminded us that we cannot lose sight of how women's struggles to keep their place at the table, even within the activist movements, has been and still is hard-fought. Then, as Katherine and María Celeste reminded us, there is a struggle to combat the invisibility, concealment, and elimination of the contributions and work at all levels, but especially in the political, academic, and activist spheres of women in history. What all speakers have shown is many of the successes achieved within

indigenous politics, whether environmental or struggles related to cultural, language, or education access, as well as political representation, are the results of efforts carried out and led by women. But also, that these have been intergenerational struggles and that the struggles being continued today are at once the legacy of histories of slavery, territorial displacement, cultural, and political erasure, but also the legacy of long histories of resistance.

Katherine and María Celeste exemplified intergenerational stories of oppression and resistance, highlighting how the legacies of slavery directly impact the current state of afro-descendant communities in Ecuador and Mexico. They illustrate intergenerational continuities of injustice, as well as the long-standing processes of insurgency and resistance of these peoples. Catarina and Watatakulu talked about how their experiences as young children and then as young indigenous women shaped their gravitation towards the political movements and activism they are now leading. They have carried forward the activist struggles of their families and their communities. All this underscores how activism is simultaneously a choice for many women but also for others it is not a choice, and it's simply what's required for survival. Survival of cultures, language, communities, families, indigenous knowledge, survival of land. This and the shared urgency of the indigenous activism we have learned about today also underscores the significance of networks and solidarities within afro-indigenous political activism. By foregrounding the global solidarities of indigenous politics in our understandings of these movements and their histories, I think what each of the panelists and this forum help us to see so clearly is how very pervasive through time and place the enduring structures and systems of colonialism in all its forms are today. Situating those present-day struggles and their activism in the larger context of struggles engaged historically by indigenous peoples across the globe, we are reminded by the panelists that colonialism persists and continues to structure our world. Its effects, its consequences, its very continuance, evidenced in the systems of capital, education, and institutional power that continue to privilege certain voices. By centering indigenous and afro-descendant women, their communities, histories, voices, and knowledge, this panel provides a powerful example of how important and how possible it is for institutional spaces to be created that do center indigenous knowledge and voices. Likewise in the



activist work described by our panelists today, we see how much grassroots work is already being done, which also needs greater support to create spaces for indigenous representation, whether it's in academic or educational settings, medical settings, political settings. In closing, it's worth considering a possible call to action here, especially for those of us who work in the educational sector, that I think we heard in all the stories experiences and knowledge of the panelists that were shared today. But also in the very model that has been set by this panel itself. This is the urgency and significance of centering indigenous and afro-indigenous voices. Because as Watatakalu noted in her final comments, these are the communities who historically have been on the front line of environmental and territorial destruction – which sadly is a future that lies ahead of all of us. So as a parting thought I wanted to share the words of aboriginal elder, Lilla Watson, a Gangu woman from the Dawson River region in Queensland (Australia). Watson, at the 1985 United Nations Decade for Women's Conference in Nairobi, said: "If you have come here to help me you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together". I think her words and all the knowledge we have learned today from all our incredible panelists is something we can all carry forward with us from this panel. I wanted to thank everyone again for being here, and for all the knowledge that was shared, and to thank our organizers for making this possible.

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Figure 2. Tapirema Community, Pyátsagwêra Indigenous Land (Piaçaguera) (Peruibe). Language revitalization workshop and attendance in support of Catarina Nimbopyruá Delfina dos Santos at the panel "Building Afro-Indigenous Affective Networks: Women, Education, and Activism in Latin America", international seminar "Indigenous and Afro-descendant Peoples in the Americas: Collaboration, Archaeology, Repatriation, and Cultural Heritage". In the image: Renato Oliveira, Mariana Gonzaga and Idati Aparecida Lemos. Photo: Fabiana Leite, 2024.



Figure 3. Tapirema Community, T1 Pyátsagwéra (Piaçaguera) (Peruibe). Language revitalization workshop and attendance in support of Catarina Nimbopyruá Delfina dos Santos on the panel "Building Afro-Indigenous Affective Networks: Women, Education, and Activism in Latin America", international seminar "Indigenous Peoples and Afro-descendants in the Americas: Collaboration, Archaeology, Repatriation, and Cultural Heritage". Featured in the image: Idati Aparecida Lemos and Cristina Delfina dos Santos. Photo: Fabiana Leite, 2024

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