

The Greek Review of Social Research

Vol 140 (2013)

Special Issue 140-141, B-C: Migration, gender and precarious subjectivities in the era of crisis. Editors: Athina Athansiou, Giorgos Tsimouris



Escaping the exception: Migrant sex workers between subjectification and excess

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doi: [10.12681/grsr.60](https://doi.org/10.12681/grsr.60)

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To cite this article:

Peano, I. (2013). Escaping the exception: Migrant sex workers between subjectification and excess. *The Greek Review of Social Research*, 140, 119–132. <https://doi.org/10.12681/grsr.60>

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ESCAPING THE EXCEPTION:
MIGRANT SEX WORKERS BETWEEN
SUBJECTIFICATION AND EXCESS

ABSTRACT

The paper examines the play of multiple, displacing and emplacing regimes of subjectification as they impinge upon the life experiences of migrant Nigerian sex workers, as well as the ways in which the women's subjectivities might exceed such regimes. Dispositifs such as those of migration policy and humanitarianism, of precariousness and institutionalised predation in neoliberal economies, but also of gender and kinship, interweave through complex genealogies that do not yield unequivocal victim-subjects or, on the contrary, subjects enforcing exploitation from a position of power. Likewise, neither mobility nor stasis, or border crossings and settled lives are straightforwardly mappable on excess or constraint: migration and return are experienced ambiguously, alternatively as liberating and constraining.

Keywords: *subjectivities, migration, sex work, Nigeria*

Loveth was in her early 20s when she was introduced by a friend to an older woman, whose sister lived in Italy. She had heard that the woman's sister could "sponsor" her journey "to that side," that place where money flows from, where many women from Benin City live and work. Their remittances build houses, support the education of young members of their families, buy cars, flashy clothes and other luxury goods, pay for lavish burial and wedding ceremonies. The prospect of a life of comfort, the ability to support her relatives, the taste of independence, a new experience,

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white lovers...her fantasies overshadowed the rumours circulating in town about prostitution, about the harsh treatment that those women received in the hands of evil *madams*, about having to sleep with dogs, with deformed men, of having to act in porn movies. They must be borne of jealousy, of the envy of those whose destiny has excluded them from such privileges, or of the selfishness of those politicians who enrich themselves at the expense of the people, “eating” public money without giving anything back. Those same politicians who periodically send their cronies to the market, where Loveth helped her mother sell *okra* and other vegetables, to tell the women not to send their daughters to Italy. But market women know better, and never listen to them. They even chase them away, shouting and throwing stones. Politicians don’t like commoners to become rich like they are. And in any case, doing prostitution “in abroad” cannot be that bad. Nothing over there is as terrible as it is in this Nigeria, where the electrical power supply is notoriously unpredictable, where the roads are bad, the schools don’t teach and the hospitals don’t cure, where the police only stand with those who can afford their support, where everything has to be paid for and everybody is always looking for money. So she decided to leave, without asking too many questions and without telling even her mother, who unlike other market women would not agree to sending her daughter off. She swore in front of the gods that she would repay her debt to Joy, the woman who was sponsoring the journey, that she would listen to her and do what she was told. It was the early 2000s, many other girls she knew had already gone.

Angela, on the other hand, had reached Italy some seven years previously, in her mid-30s, leaving behind three children whom she needed to support on her own. Their father had other women, other children, no job and no love left for Angela. In her case, the deal was clear from the beginning: she would work on the streets, sell sex and repay a debt of 30 million lire to the young woman thanks to whom she was able to travel. Through her help, she could finally get a chance in abroad. She never swore any oath to the *juju*; Angela and her *madam*’s representatives in Benin City had a written agreement that she had signed in front of a lawyer. After some time working in the streets, she was able to find work as a carer for an elderly lady. She repaid her debt and got a regular permit. But then the lady died, Angela lost her job, and after a few months her papers had expired too. So it was the streets once again, hustling in the cold winter nights. And it was not long before the police caught her without documents, brought her to a “camp” and then onto a plane bound to Nigeria. She was like a mad-

woman for a long time, unable to accept to have lost all she had painfully built in those years, moving from place to place, from relative to relative, unable to see a way out. It was too late for her to attempt a new journey, as others had done renegotiating their debt with another sponsor, and so she slowly sought to get used to life in Nigeria once more. But the nostalgia for her time in Italy lingered, and she did nothing to conceal it. This proved counter-intuitive to the representatives of an international NGO which Angela had contacted about the possibility of receiving a micro-credit loan for “victims of trafficking”, and even played a part in precluding her access to the money.

Loveth’s journey lasted a few months. From Benin City she was taken to Lagos with other girls. They stayed in a hotel for a while, watched over by a man who eventually was able to obtain traveling papers for them. They boarded a plane to Accra in the company of a “trolley”, who then handed them over to someone else. After another wait of a few weeks, they left again to Brussels. Yet more time passed, long days spent in a house from which they could not come out except for a few night-time walks, closely monitored by the Nigerian man who had picked them up at the airport. Then, finally, they reached Turin. They were taken to yet another house, where they joined other girls from Benin. After a few days, the *madam* appeared. She handed Loveth some clothes – hot pants and a tiny top, and told her to follow the others to work. They would tell her what to say, in this language which she didn’t know. For clients, she would be called “Regina”. So it was true, she would have to do prostitution. Her protests were met with harsh words and heavy blows, and Loveth surrendered. The first few days were hard, she had never had sex with a man before and she could not make any money. But the *madam*’s fury, her threats and the pain from her beatings broke Loveth’s resistance, and in a few months she got used to the job, learning to negotiate with clients, to stand up against those other women who tried to oust her from her working *joint*, to run away every time she spotted a police car coming her way. She started having more regular clients, who sometimes would volunteer larger amounts of money than her normal fee of 20 euros, to help her settle the debt or to send to her mother. One of them in particular, an older and lonely man, who would pick her up from home and take her to her workplace, bring her food and charcoal to keep herself warm in winter. She knew he could be, literally, her passport to a better life. And so she agreed to marry him, three years after she had reached Italy. He took a loan from the bank and paid off 20,000 euros of Loveth’s debt to Joy. But the debt was much larger, it was

70,000, and the bank also needed repaying. So it was that, in concert with her husband, Loveth kept working on the streets and started recruiting other girls from Benin City, charging them interest on the journey's expenses.

A DISCLAIMER AND A STARTING POINT

The narratives with which I open this paper are not, in any way, "true" stories. They do not claim to faithfully represent the life experiences of "real" characters, or to reproduce their voices. Further, they shy away from realism not only in the rather commonly accepted sense that, like any representation, they required an interpretive re-authoring. Rather, these narratives condense and revisit a number of stories I collected, from various oral and written sources, while researching what is commonly referred to as an instance of human trafficking. They also deliberately blend different perspectives and narrative styles. They borrow from Nigerian-English expressions, articulating commonly voiced opinions and sentiments as I picked them up in conversation with a number of interlocutors across borders, and weave them into accounts that seek to conceptualize some aspects of the displacements and emplacements characterizing the bonded-labour migration of Nigerian women from Benin City.

My choice derives, in part, from the necessity to come to terms with the complexity of the narrated and lived experiences I was confronted with in their fleeting singularity and momentary uniqueness, and to do so in relation to an extremely crowded discursive field. Media, popular literature, international agencies, humanitarian and religious organizations, academic researches and state institutions each bear upon, and actively construct, "the issue" from multiple and only partly overlapping angles, each laying claims to the truth value of their accounts, sometimes reinforcing one another and other times at cross-angles. I include all these knowledge practices as part of my field of inquiry, as subjectifying mechanisms with enabling and constraining, displacing and emplacing powers, and seek to unravel some of the ways in which they operate. Thus, my descriptive stance lays bare the power dynamics underlying any kind of narrative, and does so drawing on a fieldwork experience in which life stories were more or less explicitly wielded as tactical weapons, situationally manipulated to produce specific effects, to extract resources of various kinds, to conceal as much as to expose (cf. Peano, 2010).

Indeed, my interlocutors often authored different versions of their life stories in different contexts, against the concerns with transparency, ac-

countability and objectivity that underscore, for example, humanitarian projects for the protection and reintegration of recognised victims of trafficking. And stories were often contested. So, to continue with the fiction, it could turn out from a neighbour's account that after her return Angela had sent her daughter abroad, or that she was recruiting women on behalf of that helpful young *madam* of hers. And Loveth could have claimed to have been falsely accused of exploiting other women by rival sex workers/*madams*, who were trying to pay her back for some dispute over money, a lover, or the right to occupy a particular place on the street. Or by women who, in order to receive a permit as "victims of trafficking" under the humanitarian clauses of Italian immigration law, were compelled to denounce their *madam* to the authorities but feared physical and spiritual retaliations, on their persons or on relatives back in Nigeria, and thus deflected the accusations on a suitable third party. Perhaps somebody envied her luck in finding a white husband, or felt her quickly amassed fortune must have hidden something else.

Yet, fictions are significant as they bring to the fore questions related to lived experience and its representation. I have chosen to craft these particular narratives as my starting point to convey some of the complexities entailed in analyzing the subjectivities of migrant Nigerian sex workers, in all their diversity and uniqueness. These begin to sketch the women's entanglements in multiple modalities of subjectification that do not yield unequivocal images of victimhood or, on the contrary, of "criminals" or of individuals in a position of power. Further, as I will show in the rest of this paper, they hint at the presence of a remainder, an excess that escapes the strictures of those different subjectifying regimes.

Thus, a distinction between subjectivity and subjectification makes itself analytically necessary. Whilst the latter defines the "constitution [of] subjects in both senses of the word" (Foucault, 1980: 60), subjectivity can be taken to represent "the experience of the lived multiplicity of positionings[,] historically contingent[,] produced through the plays of power/knowledge and [...] held together by desire" (Blackman *et al.*, 2008: 6). If projects of subjectification are necessarily incomplete (as, indeed, the reason for their continued existence lies in their ever-unfinished character), what exactly escapes, and how, is a matter for further analysis. In what follows, I reflect on the play between regimes of subjectification and subjective experiences, and on the relationship of both to dynamics of displacement and emplacement.

NEOLIBERAL PRECARITY, MIGRATION
AND THE TRAFFICKED WOMAN

The presence of significant numbers of Nigerian sex workers began to be registered in the Italian press in the late 1980s (cf. Anon., 1989a; Anon., 1989b; N. Pie., 1989; Tessandori, 1989),¹ a time when their country of origin was experiencing great crisis on several levels – economic, political, moral and symbolic (Apter, 1999). The drastic devaluation of the national currency, the naira, which followed the collapse of oil prices after a period of boom in the 1970s; and Nigeria’s military dictator Ibrahim Babangida’s subsequent acceptance of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank’s Structural Adjustment Program of state divestment and liberalization, in exchange for loans, unmasked the ugly face of hyper-neoliberal policies. This period concomitantly marked a licensing of corruption and illegality on an unprecedented scale, arguably not as the unintended consequences (or as exacerbating factors) of crisis, but as the necessary underside of a specific power formation. In this context the boundaries between legality and illegality appeared as increasingly blurred. Indeed, the generation of wealth in the postcolonial milieu, where the reach of the state is uneven and sovereignty contested, is often, in Jean and John Comaroff’s view, related to the ability to sustain “zones of ambiguity between the presence and the absence of the law” (2006: 5), in a context in which rumour and uncertain communication prevail, flashing “signs of inchoate danger lurking beneath the banal surface of things, danger made real by the sudden, graphic assaults on persons and property” (Ibid: 9).

Criminalizing practices were also in place, to deflect attention away from the rampant corruption, violence and repression of dissent perpetrated by political and business elites and their multinational corporate allies. Examples of the criminalization of the poor and dispossessed are legion, ranging from the burnt corpses of petty thieves that still constitute a disturbingly common sight on the streets of Nigeria, to the public executions or exposure of abject criminals of various sorts (cf. Adebani and Obadare, 2010), and the rise of vigilantism (Bastian, 2003; Gore and Pratten, 2003; Pratten, 2006); from the blaming of vagrants for ritual killings and kidnappings to the indictment of market women for the soaring

1. More recent texts also place the origins of the traffic in the same period. See Corso and Trifirò, 2003; Corso, cited in Waugh, 2006; Nazzaro, 2010. Subsequently, it extended to encompass other European destinations, most notably Spain, Norway, Austria, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, France and Greece (cf. Carling, 2005).

prices of foodstuffs and the mowing down of their stalls with armoured vehicles, or the demonization of the Ogoni and other people of the Delta demanding justice for the devastation of their lands by multinational oil companies (Apter, 1999: 295-6). These dynamics thus compound into a “necropolitics” (Mbembe, 2003) in which predatory forms of power make life eminently precarious.

Further, the generalized crisis that began in 1980s Nigeria led to a loss of credibility of the state and the naira itself. In Apter’s analysis, the disappearance of the substance of monetary value led to a broader crisis of representation, in which “floating signifiers” were emptied of monetary and institutional referents, and to the emergence (or at least the escalation and refinement across social strata) of a peculiar form of crime: fraud, which became popular under the name of “419”, after the article of the criminal code regulating it. Since its rise to fame, 419 has also become the shorthand for any form of deception and chicanery, from romantic or sexual liaisons turned sour to general evaluations on individuals’ trustworthiness and moral standing, in a context of generalized ambiguity and suspicion.

In fact, human trafficking itself seemingly works as a scam: according to the standard narrative, naïve young women and their families are persuaded to entrust themselves or their kin to well-meaning *sponsors* who promise the girls non-existent jobs as maids, baby-sitters, shop assistants, hairdressers, only to force them onto the streets and extort exorbitant interest rates on their expense repayments. And in effect, the practice seems to have emerged roughly at the same time as that of 419, and of the “crisis of value” which framed it. And yet, in line with the active fostering of ambiguity as a tool of power and manipulation, deception in this case may not be as straightforward as discourses on trafficking might imply. For Apter, “[t]he “seeing is believing” of the oil boom has given way to the visual deceptions of the oil bust, a social world not of objects and things but of smoke and mirrors, a business culture of worthless currency, false façades, and empty value forms” (1999: 279). Not only did politics itself become synonymous with fraud and illusion, and governance institutions emptied of their administrative purpose to become mimetic copies whose fictional systems of transparency and accountability are solely functional to the elites’ robberies. Seemingly, the very foundations of social interaction crumbled together with the distinction between truth and falsehood, and the disappearance of truth value itself, in a system in which illusion became the basis for survival.

Whilst longer genealogies of violence and exploitation (most notably those of colonialism, mercantilism and the slave trade), and their relation-

ship to the politics of secrecy and ambiguity (cf. Ferme, 2001), undeniably play a part in shaping precarious existence, suspicious dispositions and subjectifying mechanisms, the crisis of value of 1980s Nigeria added to and partly transformed them. But in order to understand the migration trajectories of Nigerian women, their subjectification and subjectivity, other dynamics must be considered, in the light of the global character of neoliberal power. Corruption, criminalization and suspicion are not confined to the postcolony: networks of trafficking are indissolubly linked to wider patterns of political-economic restructuring. The outsourcing of industrial production, the progressive erosion of workers' rights and welfare, in their relation to neoliberal forms of capital characterized social transformations in 1980s Europe as well (Hardt and Negri, 2000). The trafficking of women was founded on a trade of visas and on the corruptibility of embassies and border officers, and articulated to other forms of illicit trade in narcotics, arms and toxic waste.² Furthermore, it took shape in the context of the progressive securitization of borders and tightening of migration policies, whereby legal entry for non-European citizens became increasingly difficult, if ever more eagerly sought in the wake of economic destitution. Thus, a pool of disposable, cheap labour was made available on the market, especially in those sectors, such as sex work, where demand was growing (Palidda, 2000; Papadopoulos *et al.*, 2008). Migration policies which increasingly rely on criminalization and the creation of zones of exception, whereby subjects are stripped of their political and civil rights to their "bare life" (cf. Agamben, 1998), had the effect of increasing exploitative and violent mechanisms of migration and labour, rather than hermetically sealing borders. Concomitantly, the rise of an emergency-based, international human rights regime based on compassion (Ticktin, 2011)

2. In 1996, the Italian press reported the arrest of three Italian employees at the country's Lagos embassy, subsequently convicted for extortion by Turin's tribunal. This followed the discovery, through Nigerian bonded sex labourers' accounts, of a decade-long trade in visas (also in place at other European embassies), which was directly linked to the exploitation of female sexual labour on European kerbs and which had been suspected and denounced in vain for years (Barbiero and Pietropinto, 1996; Borghesan, 1996; Girola, 1996; Olivero, 2005: 8-9; Romagnoli, 1996). Widespread reporting of such connivances had led Turin's prosecuting attorney to open an investigation in 1992, which however was dropped for unspecified reasons. Together with women, it emerged how drugs, arms, banking codes, stolen cars, toxic waste and perhaps organs travel this 'privileged' route in alternate directions (Mascarino and Romagnoli, 1996; Nazzaro, 2010; for recent investigations on the trafficking of bank codes, cars and organs, cf. Numa, 2010). Nor can this be treated as an isolated case: for other examples, cf. Aikpitanyi and Maragnani (2007: 16); UNICRI (2003: 68).

determined the polarization of the subjectivities of migrant sex workers between “trafficking victims” and “recidivist criminals” (Crowhurst, 2012). Yet, as the narratives I introduced at the start of this paper hint, subjectifying mechanisms cannot be taken at face value, and the presence of an excess makes itself manifest.

ESCAPES, SUBJECTIVITIES AND HOPE

The experiences and yearnings of the women I encountered are not reducible to dynamics of coercion, exploitation and violence alone - they are also driven by a joyous hope. Indeed, in many of the stories I collected first- or second-hand, the spontaneous desire to explore and escape functions as a potent explanatory narrative of initiation into long and difficult journeys. Ivie described her experience thus:

the way I even left, it was not as if I even prepared for it, the same way I got the information [about how to *travel*] I just [went to] people, ready to *travel* [chuckling]. So I just told them that I'm interested, that was how I followed them [...] to Italy. [It] is like you, maybe since you've been in Europe you've been hearing of “Africa, Africa”, you've not really seen Africa [and] have been wishing to see Africa. “Ah, this is Africa! I really want to know what is special about this Africa, you know, I want to know what is really going on there”. Same thing with Africans, they want to go there. “Ah, is this Europe, Europe, Europe...I really want to go there and see”. Even if somebody is telling you that “is not what you think-o!”, you don't even want to listen. You want to see for yourself. I would say that my own was like that. [...] I never planned for it, I never dreamt of it [...]. (Interview with Ivie, Benin City, 15 September 2007).

Happiness accompanied the prospect of travelling, and, of course, neither were moments of laughter and enjoyment lacking in my encounters with Nigerian sex workers and deportees. My very first experience of outreach work in Turin's distant outskirts, one sunny October afternoon in 2006, was revelatory in this sense, and unsettled my expectations with regard to migrant sex work. Getting to a side road, that connects to the city's wide ring-road and cuts across a hybrid rural/urban landscape, the van-driver-*cum*-NGO-worker pulled over so that we and the Nigerian “cultural mediator”³ could talk to a group of women. They were sitting on

3. In Italy, cultural mediators work in the context of different state and NGO projects di-

makeshift chairs and warming themselves up with a fire of charcoals lit inside a small, empty tin barrel. We were greeted loudly and cheerfully, and given something to sit on, whilst cars kept dashing past - some briefly stopped, perhaps potential clients unsure of whether or not to approach this atypical group of women. Conversation followed along jesting lines, peaking at the point at which the NGO worker unveiled a plastic dildo from inside a small bag, proceeding to test the women's ability to correctly apply a condom on it. The women were dancing, jumping, running, jokingly but forcefully vying to appropriate the free condoms, creams, and leaflets being handed out - and laughing all the while. They exceeded the bounds that their representation as black postcolonial citizens, rightless migrants, ruthless criminals or bonded sex workers might impose upon them.

Papadopoulos *et al.* (2008) argue that this joyous migrant movement represents an escape from one's immediate conditions that cannot be reduced to a response to regulation, but rather *determines* shifts in regulatory (coercive and violent, but also enabling) subjectifying mechanisms (cf. Anderson and Andrijasevic, 2009; Hardt and Negri, 2000; Mezzadra, 2004). They reject the post-Fordist characterization of migration as an individual, calculated strategy and as a unidirectional movement, in favour of a (Deleuzian) view which sees it as a continuous re-articulation of singular trajectories that defies identification and control, a "continuous experience" which is not exclusive to humans as such but inherently relational, transformative and diffuse. I take this acknowledgement as a form of knowledge reorientation towards what has "not-yet" become, a knowledge open to the future (cf. Miyazaki, 2004; Thrift, 2007).

Such approach provides notions of agency and subjectivity that, whilst acknowledging structural constraints, do not reduce subjects to structures' epiphenomena, nor do they subscribe to overly functionalist or individualist accounts of intentionality and action. Yet, the "method of hope" cannot be considered as dependent on a *complete* re-orientation away from the suppressed/repressed, the past/present of suffering in the embracing of the future. Ivie also narrated how she later came to realize that her spontaneous embarking in a *travelling* adventure was a big mistake, a naïve leap into the unknown with high personal costs:

rected to migrants, acting as translators in the broad sense of the term, after having attended dedicated training courses. My role during the outreach sessions in which I took part between October 2007 and April 2008, after conducting research in Benin, *de facto* substituted the cultural mediator's.

When I was there I was always sending cassette, [I would] record my voice and send it to my people, I was always complaining that I'm really tired of this. Even when they were repatriating me, there were many people that were regretting it, me, I was happy because, when I got there and I saw the life I regretted it, it was miserable for me. I didn't have my kind of life, so I wanted to go back. [...] I don't think there is any girl who has travelled there that is really happy, usually they are forced experiences, most of them cry. [...] They are like slaves (Ibid.).

This perspective broadens the notion of escape (as a leap away from one's conditions) to include the experience of *return*, and problematizes the extent to which it may be seen as evading or anticipating regulation, insofar as *multiple* forms of control are in place that shape (whilst certainly not exhausting) the experiences of migrant Nigerian women. Bondage to *madams*, governmental mechanisms of criminalization and/as victimization, kinship or marriage ties and a myriad other relations, all of which carry significant, and often ambiguous, *affective* dimensions, might overlap in ensuring control, but they may also clash or diverge in some respects, and do not exclude transgression. Thus, forced repatriation –an extreme act of control over migrant mobility– might at the same time provide an escape from debt bondage.

Hence, trajectories are complex and extremely diverse, more so than some accounts of migration allow for. Whilst Papadopoulos *et al.* (2008) seem to acknowledge suffering as also being part of migrants' experiences, they nonetheless proceed to elide any reference to it in their account. Yet, hope itself carries defeat as a potential condition within it, and is born of ill-being and uncertainty (Anderson, 2006: 742). Indeed, in my conversations with Nigerian migrant women, *gambling* and *risk-taking* emerged as powerful descriptors for their quests, a hope in the future and a trust in destiny despite its unpredictability and the wretchedness of the present. "This *travel* of a thing is like a game, if you have luck you play [*sic*] is good, if you don't have luck, you play bad, it's a game, you understand?" – such were the words of Osas, a friend and former migrant sex worker, among other things, as I recorded them in Benin City. In at least two separate instances she had negotiated a debt that had allowed her to reach Europe, was deported in both cases and had contracted HIV. And yet, her qualms against travelling concerned the conditions under which she had to exercise sex work (and especially the lack of autonomy), and of the risks it entailed, which she carefully balanced against the advantages. She claimed

she was prepared to *travel* again, despite her having just given birth and being sick: “What else can I do? I will go if there is nothing else for me here”. Her project of opening a hair salon and her attempts at trading in the market had failed. The micro-credit bank that had lent her the money on behalf of an international anti-trafficking project was threatening to take her to court, given her failure to return what she owed.

Thus, the play of multiple regimes of subjectification – those of migration policy and of humanitarianism, and their reliance on exceptionalism; those of precariousness in neoliberal economies more generally; but also those of gender and kinship – that result from complex genealogies, and of modalities of escape and excess predicated on hope appears to articulate with modalities of displacement and emplacement in tortuous ways. Neither mobility nor stasis, or border crossings and settled lives are straightforwardly mappable on excess or constraint. Rather, hope and excess may emerge, unexpected, from any, or be quashed in contexts in which they may be expected to thrive. Yet, a focus on multiple subjectivities potentially in excess of power regimes’ attempts to constrain them is necessary not to reduce the representation of experiences to mechanical replications of one another or to instrumental, rationalist quests.

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