

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Tributes to Dick Ohmann:
Special Session, Modern Language Association,
January 7, 2022

by Sarah Chinn, Joseph Entin, Barbara Foley, Pat Keeton,
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Barbara Foley

Richard Ohmann, a highly prominent—and much esteemed—figure in our profession, died in October 2021. His loss is mourned by the many people who knew and admired him. The participants in this roundtable—most of whom worked alongside him as activists in the MLA Radical Caucus and/or the editorial collective of *Radical Teacher*—will reflect upon Dr. Ohmann's many contributions to the study of the humanities. Such a tribute is only fitting.

Some of us were influenced by his materialist approach to speech-act theory and his rigorous work as a cultural historian. Others had the benefit of his teaching, either at Wesleyan University or at the many MLA sessions where he presented his work on American culture. Others were moved by *English in America* (1976), which, more than any work of its era, critically examined the politics routinely embedded in pedagogy in the humanities.

Besides appreciating Dr. Ohmann's outstanding contributions to critical theory, literary and cultural history, and humanistic pedagogy, all the participants in the roundtable were personally acquainted with Dr. Ohmann through the MLA. One—Paul Lauter—goes back to the days of antiwar activism in the late 1960s. Others have worked with Dr. Ohmann over the decades in bringing before the Delegate Assembly dozens of resolutions concerning everything from supporting unionization to opposing attacks on academic freedom, backing student movements against sweatshop labor to supporting undocumented students' demands for access to financial aid. Still others have tirelessly put out issue after issue of *Radical Teacher*, a magazine committed to exploring how anti-capitalist and egalitarian values can effectively be brought forth in the college classroom.

Dr. Ohmann was, among his many virtues, a generous and very funny man. No doubt some of the speakers will take a few minutes to relate favorite anecdotes.

Richard Ohmann exemplified the spirit of the best in the humanities: a passion for truth, as well as grace and humility in its pursuit: "full of moral virtue was his speech/ and gladly would he learn and gladly teach." The MLA benefited greatly from his presence and dedication; this roundtable will attempt to do justice to the contributions of this remarkable scholar and human being

Paul Lauter

The year is 1967. The war on Vietnam seems to be accelerating and undermining Lyndon Johnson's "war on poverty." Demonstrations—larger and larger—have no discernable effect, nor does lobbying Congress or petitioning the President. Not even a sit-in at a Pentagon parking lot. An increasing number of young men have decided to burn their Selective Service cards or to commit civil disobedience by resisting the draft. A group of America's leading intellectuals and academics join in the disobedience by issuing a "Call to Resist Illegitimate Authority," which commits them—illegally—to support and encourage the draft resisters and other direct actions against the war. On

October 2, the group of us, which included Noam Chomsky, Benjamin Spock, Paul Goodman, Grace Paley, William Slone Coffin, and Dick Ohmann hold a press conference to announce the "Call to Resist" and to make visible our own commitment to disobedience. Later, we go up to Columbia University to form a new draft resistance support organization, to be called Resist.

Dick Ohmann, along with Chomsky, Louis Kampf, Florence Howe, and I, became part of the Resist steering committee. During the following year, 1968, at Resist meetings we begin to talk about "stirring things up" at the MLA convention, which is scheduled for the end of December in New York. Dick writes a letter* to the *New York Review of Books* inviting people to join us in a meeting at Columbia just before the MLA. His language—ironic yet dead serious—sets the tone of our efforts. People volunteer to create buttons (one said "Mother Language Association"); they put together posters (one quoted Blake: "The tygers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction"); they circulate petitions, like one against going to Mayor Daley's Chicago for the next MLA. Others organize an anti-war talk by Chomsky in a huge hotel ballroom.

Once the convention is underway, we begin meeting regularly in Dick's room at the City Squire motel. We call ourselves the "tactics committee." We plan events, like a sit-in in the lobby of the Americana, for which the hotel called the NY Tac Squad. We organize a quiet picket of an MLA presidential forum—ties and dresses, please. Two proposals marked our meetings: Louis Kampf and two others had been arrested defending our posters from a house dick who wanted to tear them down. It was at Dick's suggestion that we decided to run Louis for MLA second vice-president, from which position he would be elevated to MLA's presidency in two years. Dick nominated him, and Louis was indeed elected. But our most consequential decision was to take up a proposal made by two women—whose names are unknown, at least to me—to establish an MLA Commission on the Status of Women in the Profession. Dick's was a strong and crucial voice in support of this then quite remarkable proposal. The MLA business meeting soundly voted to establish the Commission; it would become a significant force within the MLA, and it provided a model for similar efforts in other academic and professional organizations.

We transitioned from the "tactics committee" to the Radical Caucus in English and the Modern Languages, which of course continues to exist and act these 53 years later. When we separated the magazine *Radical Teacher* from the Radical Caucus, Dick and I continued to work in both. Because, as his career so vividly illustrates, and as he taught many of us, radical change requires both action from principle and eloquent expression. He provided us with both.

* See: <https://tinyurl.com/yyyyf9dnv>

Ellen Schrecker

Whenever I open my refrigerator, I'm reminded of Dick. There's a big jar of olives just waiting for the martinis that we share whenever he comes for dinner. My presence in this compendium of tributes is testimony, as if such is needed,

to the breadth of Dick's intellectual interests and genuine interdisciplinarity. I'm an historian who's written a lot about McCarthyism and political repression as well as about the politics of higher education – the subject that brought me and Dick together.

I first got to know Dick sometime in the 1980s, though it did feel as if I must have known him forever. We had a few mutual friends and acquaintances and were both newcomers to the Upper West Side. Confessing that he was looking for intellectual companionship, Dick reached out to me because of our mutual interest in the politics of higher education.

We also bonded over our shared background at Harvard in the late 1950s and our rather embarrassing nostalgia about Cambridge in the so-called Golden Age of the American university. I didn't know Dick then; as a member of the hyper-elite Society of Fellows, a group of some dozen graduate students selected every year for their intellectual promise, he was far above my station. I was an undergraduate at Radcliffe, very much on the periphery of things, but nonetheless aware of the aura of intellectual excitement that existed in those days at that place.

As our friendship grew, Dick and I would go for walks in Riverside Park, and then, as I began serious research on the academic community in the 60s, these casual conversations morphed into more formal interviews – sometimes coinciding with a glorious dinner that Dick seemingly effortlessly produced – accompanied, of course, by the requisite martinis. As the book took shape, Dick became a key presence in the narrative – and not just because of his antiwar activities and efforts to revolutionize his discipline. His wry self-awareness and measured analysis of the events he had participated in guided my own understanding of how radicalism evolved within the academic profession. Plus, it was hard not to quote some of his pithier observations. As my book's index revealed, I cited Dick ten times, admittedly somewhat less than the other members of his squad – Paul Lauter and Louis Kampf – received. But he was perhaps more involved in his simultaneous day jobs of producing literary criticism and trying to democratize Wesleyan University. There were not many leftists in the upper administrations of American academia – then or ever.

My fellow authors will address Dick's scholarship more knowledgably than I can, but what most impressed me about his work, besides the breadth of his interests, was his dedication to the craft of writing. He once confessed that he edited all his emails. But he concealed his high standards beneath such an abundance of warmth and charm that it gave you hope. It was possible for a cis-male of his generation to be both brilliant and kind. And funny and a hotshot poker player and a nationally ranked competitive swimmer.

Our collaboration included more than martinis. Back in about 2013, we co-edited an issue of *Radical Teacher* on The Decline of the Professions.* I don't think I contributed much to that endeavor, but I certainly learned a lot. Dick's wide-ranging engagement with the sociology of knowledge encouraged me to read at least three or more books on whatever aspect of the professions we were looking at.

A few years later, as my book, *The Lost Promise: American Universities in the 1960s*, began to take shape, Dick graciously agreed to critique the chapters on which I was working. He did so in his usual understated yet probing manner – almost always, it should be noted, pushing me gently to the Left by pressing me to be more explicit about the political implications of what I was discovering. I'm not sure I ever satisfied him, but I do know that the final product benefited enormously not only from his specific advice and encouragement but also, and above all, from his example of a serious scholar whose intellectual work had political value.

I did finally pay him back a little bit a few years ago when I followed up after a conversation with my recently widowed friend Susan O'Malley, who confessed that she thought that Dick, whom, she noted, she had known forever, seemed to be taking a different kind of interest in her. I immediately invited them both to dinner – and the rest is history. I miss him a lot, especially when I struggle over finding exactly the right tone in an email to an editor or colleague and realize that I'm subconsciously channeling a little bit of Dick Ohmann's perfectionism – though certainly not his brilliance.

See *Radical Teacher* #99,
<http://radicalteacher.library.pitt.edu/ojs/radicalteacher/issue/view/4>

Pat Keeton

What I have always admired about Richard Ohmann and learned from him is the value and necessity of day-to-day, year-to-year activism. I worked with him on the MLA Radical Caucus Steering Committee meetings where we would begin with an analysis of the current world and US situation from a Marxist perspective and then debate resolutions that we could put forward in the MLA Delegate Assembly: one that we thought would have a chance to pass and one further to the left that would allow us to raise consciousness and build support in the Delegate Assembly. Dick always contributed his Marxist analysis to our collective deliberations about the focus of the annual guaranteed RC panel, urged members to organize other panels, wrote and handed out petitions and leaflets, proposed radical actions including picket lines and protests, and spoke convincingly during the Delegate Assembly debates. Dick played this role to the end, actively participating in the virtual 2021 RC annual meeting and a few subsequent planning meetings after that, all on Zoom.

On my computer I found an archive of Dick's wisdom and activism going back to 2002. Here is a resolution from the 2002 MLA convention submitted by Dick and the Radical Caucus to the Delegate Assembly on the "Language of War":

Whereas governments seeking popular support for war deploy rhetoric that normalizes violence, neutralizes the pain of war, makes the enemy appear radically different from "us," and in general represents war as just and inevitable,

Therefore, be it resolved that as professionals who teach about language and culture, we have an obligation at this time to explore with students and other citizens the deceptive and dangerous force of terms such as "regime change," "war on terrorism," "axis of evil," and

"preemption" as used to justify aggressive war against Iraq.

Another Resolution from 2006 "urged that the term 'illegal aliens' be declared a term of abuse, to be substituted by the term 'undocumented workers,' and that undocumented workers be guaranteed in-state tuition wherever they reside."

And a Resolution in 2020 asked that "university faculty, staff and administrators sever university complicity with ICE."

I like to think of Richard Ohmann as a radical seed planter in his many years of activism with his students, the *Radical Teacher*, and the MLA Radical Caucus. During his long life he remained constant in his call for a Marxist class analysis and the need for socialism in his teaching, political work, and in the world.

Joseph Entin

Thanks to Barbara for organizing this, and to you all for being here. I want to say a word about Dick via his Raymond Williams-inspired 1987 book *Politics of Letters*, which reflects the wide-ranging purview of Dick's critical interests: from discussions of teaching as "theoretical practice," to the astounding chapters on the formation of the post-WWII literary canon that were originally published in *Critical Inquiry*, to dexterous histories of the rise of mass culture and modern advertising (seeds of what would become *Selling Culture*), to a critique of Strunk and White's insistence on "concrete language." There's so much here that is key to Dick's legacy: he shares his non-lectures and talks about his students taking over the classroom; "students," he writes, "must have as much responsibility as possible for their own educations. . . . Respect the linguistic resources students have," he insists, and "make language a vehicle for achievement of real political and personal aims" (293). He demonstrates his embrace--quite early among US academics--of Gramsci's insistence that ideological domination is always complex and conjunctural, that power is not a function of elite manipulation, but of the fact that "hegemony saturates the practices and beliefs and feelings of most Americans" (197); he reminds us that there is "[n]o reality without history," that seemingly fixed institutions like literature, culture, and universities have long, contested histories, structured by economic and social power: they have changed a great deal, and are thus subject to change now. He insists that institutional contexts must always be acknowledged and interrogated; teachers and writers must contest, even as they inevitably work within, the structures that shape our class interests and labors. "Marxism and feminism will not simply teach themselves via the conventions of the traditional classroom," he reminds us. "We must work out ways of mediating them that estrange those conventions and hint at alternatives. The language we use and yes, the arrangement of the chairs, can make a difference" (130).

In admirably dialectical fashion, Dick's writing weaves together the large and the small, moving deftly from the global scope of critique, in which everything is subject to ruthless scrutiny against the horizon of multinational

capitalism and epochal historical change, to the intimacy of critique, in which we find the systemic force of domination in a sentence, a clause, a phrase. "It is hardly an exaggeration to say," Dick writes in an essay on class and language, "that the whole of society as I know it is present in or impinges on my every verbal transaction" (287).

But what the book really prompts me to talk about is Dick's style--his way of writing and his way of being with others, especially his students, colleagues, and his audience, whom he approached affably as potential co-conspirators. Of course, given his erudition, smarts, and at times caustic wit, to be in Dick's presence could be humbling (as one member of the *Radical Teacher* editorial board once noted, Dick thinks in full paragraphs!). He was well-prepared for intellectual contestation, and seemed to take an almost gleeful approach to public conflict with right-wingers such as Bill Bennett and Lynne Cheney, or with the centrist-liberal editors of *The New York Times* (see his stinging letter** to the *Times* about its coverage of the MLA uprising). Even during the nadir of the Reagan era, Dick was never apologetic or sheepish about his socialist commitments.

But while he enjoyed mixing it up, Dick's approach to intellectual interaction was resoundingly invitational (and one reason I love the 1984 photo of him we projected at the start of the session, with his hand outstretched). Put differently, his mode was comradely--an invitation to conversation founded on the innate equality of minds, on the insistence that those who were often presumed by academic or social convention to know less--students or young people, in particular--often knew things that their supposed seniors or betters didn't.

As part of this stance, he was often funny and self-deprecating--as when, on the opening page of *Politics of Letters*, he recalls a talk at Wesleyan extolling the Arnoldian virtues of criticism. Listening, Dick realized that the speaker "made no mention of the circumstances within which practitioners actually work, or the functions their practice might have for them. I thought," Dick explains, "that Arnold's title called for inclusion of such matters . . . since criticism [in our time] has become so thoroughly institutionalized. As a shortcut to making the point, I mentioned the function criticism had had in advancing the speaker's own career. Well. Old hand as I am at making rude remarks, I can't remember giving such offense, before or since" (3). HA! I think the humor was there to remind us that Marxist critique need not be a dull, dry, sour affair; skewering bourgeois culture can be a gas, and a tool of radical struggle, to boot.

If you've read Dick's prose, you know it's genial and conversational; he actively defied the academic injunction to pretend total knowledge. In the end, I think the politics of his style--convivial, colloquial--reflect the very humane style of his politics--the generous, democratic vision of Marxist socialism that animated his hopes for the world, his resolute insistence that a better society would be forged only through collaboration. And that there would be a good deal of laughter, as well as rigorous critical thinking, along the way. Dick ends one of his chapters on literacy by saying: "The only way to have a democracy is to make one" (229). Dick did his best to be a democracy maker, and here democracy

is not a society governed by popular voting, but a liberated world where people make history under conditions they themselves have a genuine hand in shaping. It is a world he tried to prefigure in his teaching, writing, and relating--a world that I and many others can see more clearly thanks to Dick's influence.

**See: <https://tinyurl.com/566ckzjy>

Sarah Chinn

I didn't know Dick Ohmann as long or as well as many of the people on this roundtable. I wasn't his student or his academic colleague; I was a baby when he and his fellow radicals took over the MLA in 1968; I was just out of graduate school when he published *Selling Culture*; I didn't join the editorial collective of *Radical Teacher* until the early 2000s. Others here can talk knowledgeably about Dick's massive role in remaking the study of literature and culture, his collaborative and generous pedagogy, his commitment to mentoring younger scholars, and his unwavering belief in the possibility of social justice, despite the jaundiced eye he often cast upon current social and political arrangements. (In a panel we were both on at the 2018 MLA that commemorated the academic protests of 1968, Dick observed that while left academia may have made some nice shots, in the wake of the neoliberal marketization of higher education and the attempted privatization of pretty much everything, reactionary politics ran the table. He said: "We won; their victory eclipsed ours. Big history swallowed up small history. To challenge and alter its catastrophic course, we'll need to look squarely at how we lost while winning, since 1968.")

So I've established that my bona fides here for reflecting on Dick's legacy are pretty slim. But I want to talk about him in terms that Dick himself probably would have rejected as sentimental, drenched in the history of US Christian supremacy, and perhaps even beside the point. Dick was a man whose life was defined by grace.

By grace I don't mean elegance of movement or affect. Dick rejected the niceties of the conformist suburbanism of his youth and the self-aggrandizing propriety of the Ivy League. And as far as I could tell, he wouldn't win any deportment awards, with his long limbs and his way of folding himself into chairs that couldn't always contain him. Nor do I mean the typical Christian definition of grace as a kind of salvation from God's hand, a notion he would have rejected without hesitation.

Rather, I want to say that Dick had, and bestowed, grace in his fierce intellect, his generosity, and his humility. His gift of himself was, as theologians put it, "generous, free and totally unexpected," without self-importance or self-consciousness. That's not to say that he was uncritical. One of my clearest memories of Dick is from countless *Radical Teacher* meetings. Each meeting we spend a few minutes talking about the most recent issue that had just been published. In my experience, unless there is something terribly wrong with a journal issue that has come out -- a misspelling of an author's name, say, or an article that misrepresents or plagiarizes its sources -- it's been put to bed, done, no longer on the agenda. For Dick, however,

every issue of *RT* was worth discussing and analyzing. He would praise but also critique articles, pointing out ways in which the issue editors could have done a more skillful job of working with an author to pare down academic jargon, or tighten an argument, as a guide to how we could do it better next time around. One of the elements of Dick's grace was to model how to keep inquiring into how and why things were done, and how not just to ameliorate but to think systemically about the task at hand.

Dick's grace was wholly without vanity, both physical and intellectual. On my first visit to Hawley for our annual *Radical Teacher* "farm meeting," Dick appeared (in my memory, he's just there -- did he open the door? Come from the garden? I don't remember), wearing an old Resist t-shirt, cut-off jeans shorts, and a red bandanna around his head. Whatever intimidation I had felt towards someone whose work was so important melted away.

This is not to say that Dick was Pollyanna-ish: while he was profoundly supportive of colleagues and students, he had no illusions about how industrial capitalism and its successor, post-industrial neoliberalism, shaped every institution, every profession, every cultural product. Our obligation was to be as clear-eyed as he was, not to wish away a crisis but to engage with it (in this way he was much like another brilliant cultural critic whose loss we mourn, Stuart Hall). And he insisted along with deep analysis we bring revolutionary intention. In an interview with Marc Bousquet almost twenty years ago, he recommended that we have "pitiless clarity of vision, and rebellion. Try to see what is happening and why it's happening, and if there are somehow liberatory possibilities in the moment, fine. If it's just bad news, then just tell the bad news."

In this, I think, there is real grace. "Tell the bad news" doesn't much sound like a revolutionary rallying cry, but it's clear and unapologetic. The goal is not some kind of radical perfectibility but rather a commitment to keep going despite the various setbacks and wrong turns (Dick could be hilarious about his brief flirtation with leftist sectarianism). It's less William Blake and more Antonio Gramsci, less Bob Dylan and more Billy Bragg (or even, dare I say, Joni Mitchell). It is, I suppose, living in the world as it is and knowing that it -- and we -- can be transformed, if we're willing to do the work.

Susan O'Malley

In the fall of 1974, I first met Dick Ohmann at a Radical Caucus meeting at U Mass Amherst and then again at a meeting at Yale in the spring of 1975 when the group decided to publish a magazine called *Radical Teacher*. It was also decided at the Yale meeting that Reamy Jansen, who had been editing the *Radical Caucus Newsletter*, and I would be the co-editors, a job for which I was totally unprepared and did for the next 44 issues.

My first MLA was in 1973 when I took the train to Chicago from New Orleans to look for a job, which I was offered at Kingsborough Community College at CUNY. (I had received my PhD from Tulane two weeks before.) In the South I had been teaching and organizing a union at the University of New Orleans and was involved both with the

Civil Rights Movement and the sectarian left, not the best way to get tenure. After 10 years in New Orleans, I was anxious to return to the northeast and join what appeared to me as a progressive, activist, Marxist faculty movement. It also appeared to me that you all had more fun than I was having in the South. I avidly read everything I could find about the NUC and the Radical Caucus.

Enter Dick Ohmann. Dick was a mentor and a friend to me, inviting me to speak at Wesleyan and MLA, and instrumental in the formation and survival of *Radical Teacher* for 46 years. I count 40 some articles, introductions, and book reviews that he contributed to the magazine. In the early days the editorial board wrote much of the material. Dick was also a superb editor. I studied the articles Dick edited to learn how to be a better editor. He was also an extraordinary Board member in that he always read every issue and reported his comments both favorable and unfavorable at the next meeting.

Issue #3 of *Radical Teacher* has a review of Ohmann's *English in America* written by Reamy Jansen and a group of us working with him. The book was a critique of the history and function of English departments in supporting professionalism in the United States and in having no analysis of class. For those of us entering the profession, it was devastating. At the end of our *RT* review we wrote Dick a letter that concluded, "In other words, now that we have an analysis, what do we do?"

Dick responded with a letter that we published with our review that said:

It must be rare for someone to write a book to have the chance to discuss its aims, and whose criticism comes out of comradeship and struggle rather than the wish to score debating points or advance a career or defend a position.... I think there's much to be done in and around the classroom by those of us lucky enough to have jobs. What that might be will differ a lot from one situation to another, but I do believe it crucial to re-establish Marxism and socialist teaching in the universities. The critique of capitalism should be our daily task, in however explicit or muted a form is tolerated (or unnoticed) by our bosses. Teach literature as ideology; teach how the bourgeoisie uses the "means of mental production" (*German Ideology*); teach writing as development of consciousness and as struggle; teach the literature of the oppressed.

At Wesleyan, Dick said that his course, "Toward a Socialist America," had 70 students and the new socialist organization 100 members.

In the same issue Dick writes about "Teaching a Large Course on Contemporary Fiction" in which the syllabus included novels by Salinger, Updike, Roth, Plath, Bellow, McCarthy, and Vonnegut. He describes his approach "as building the novels up in order to knock them down. Looking closely at what's good in one of these novels almost invariably means following some insight into the difficulty of living a good life in the terms offered by our society.... Most go on to hint at solutions, and here's where I think they fall apart. They displace politics and offer personal or anarchist

or pre-industrial remedies for human sorrows that are rooted in advanced capitalist, industrial society."

For many years the *Radical Teacher* meetings were held every 6 weeks in the English Department at Wesleyan. Every summer we gathered for a weekend at Dick Ohmann's farm in Hawley, MA. The weekend would start on Friday and end Sunday at noon. We would bring food – Dick was an amazing cook – argue about movies, laugh, tell all kinds of jokes, share stories, talk politics, swim, skinny dip, once we even danced the Provost strut (Dick was then Provost) and the adjunct submissive dance, and always walk two miles to the country graveyard where Dick will be buried when the ground is warm enough in the spring. These were glorious times.

The 2 ½ years before Dick died I spent a lot of time with him. He introduced me to his doctors as his "sweetie." He became an extraordinary friend; I met many of his friends who came to the Farm and to W. 111th St. He cared deeply about his friends and former students and was a great listener. (He still had friends from his elementary school in Shaker Heights, Ohio.) When we were not together, he would send me the most carefully crafted poetic emails. His memory for poetry, facts, music, friends was phenomenal. He could sing to me all the songs he sang in elementary school and popular songs of the fifties. He even knew some lullabies. His sense of humor, if a bit bawdy, was quick and sharp. For his 90th birthday Mary Ann Clawson, a Wesleyan colleague, and I organized a Zoom party for him at the Greenfield Rehabilitation Center. Friends sent limericks. The morning of his birthday, he was rushed to the hospital with internal bleeding and that afternoon decided to go into hospice at the farm. The doctor gave him 3 months to live. At the end of 3 months the internal bleeding cured itself. The doctor was amazed; Dick was headed back to NYC and looking forward to working on the *Radical Teacher* issue on Teaching Socialism. Then his kidneys and heart failed the week before he was to return. His daughter Sarah called me so I could say goodbye to Dick before he was given morphine. He died quickly.

I will end with two birthday limericks:

When Dick reads a draft for RT
His pen moves so fast you can't see
With trenchant critique
That is not for the weak
He'll declare "it's too liberal for me!"

- Sarah Chinn

There was a professor from Hawley
Who hated all manner of folly.
With his sharp lance of wit
He proceeded to tilt
At capital's bastions, by golly!

Linda Dittmar



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