# BOREDOM IN A WRITING CLASS

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Boredom is ubiquitous in students' lives, often within themselves and always among their peers. There is a silence about boredom, however, and often a stigma attached to those who suffer from it. Because it is a common but unexplored experience, boredom makes a good topic for collaborative investigation in a writing class. The aim may not be to provide sure understanding of this complex social, emotional, and psychological phenomenon, but it is possible for students to discover that their states of mind and feeling may be discovered through writing and then subject to reflection and analysis.

My interest in the subject sprang directly from students' language use. A colleague and I found ourselves wondering why students keep labelling as "boring" the books and subjects to which we have dedicated our lives. We were serious about discovering what they meant. My first impulse was to go to the library, where I found quickly that answers to our question were not readily available. Professional work on boredom is not so available as work on other emotions and states of mind, and it is not well synthesized. To be sure, literary and historical descriptions of boredom abound. But one cannot go to the library and find much ready help in understanding boredom as students experience it. I began reading what was available on the topic, but I also began asking students in writing classes about their boredom.

It was evident immediately that students are the best informants on their own boredom. Further, they can write and talk vividly about this aspect of their experience. I saw more clearly that boredom pervades students' lives, either directly or through the impinging boredom of others. Once the students and I began analyzing their common experience, it became clear that they could describe boredom and generalize about it as

effectively as anything in print. (Social scientists would undoubtedly describe students' observations as "naive," yet, as I will try to suggest, their naive generalizations are quite apt. Of course, despite my efforts to get to the bottom of the subject, the important effort is to help students participate in careful observation and writing, not to anticipate professionals in various fields.) It also became evident that boredom is more closely related to the activity of writing than might be expected. Exploring the topic in a writing class offers an opportunity to help students become more self-conscious about aspects of their writing, as well as about their wider learning experience.

What evolved in my beginning and advanced writing classes, with help from many students, was a model for informal individual and collaborative investigation (involving writing, reading, listening, speaking) of an important but ignored subject. Investigation may begin with students' own language, their own sense of what "boring" means, and move quickly through the student and academic community and beyond. I would like to describe the process of investigation that evolved, partly as a model and partly to indicate what we discovered, which may help others tempted to venture into this realm, and finally to turn more directly to what both students and professionals say about the subject.

## Complexity of the Topic

Before I begin, however, I would like to sketch some of the complexity of the topic, which is full of counterintuitive revelations. The idea of boredom is politically and ethically charged. Juvenile delinquents, predecessors of today's urban gangs, were thought by some, including Arthur Miller, to act as they did because they were bored (see Miller, "The Bored and the Violent"). From the start, critics of industrialization argued that workers subject to machines would be bored and become less than human, a view often contradicted by close observers (see, for example, Clark Molstad, "Choosing and Coping with Boring Work"). During the early Christian period, boredom or accidia, to which the desert fathers were prey, was made a sin, an attitude that has not disappeared (see Reinhard Kuhn, *The Demon of Noontide*). On the other hand, what emerges from the study of boredom, both with students and through the

available literature, is a different vision of classrooms and of many similar human activities, in which the struggle to focus on the matter at hand is threatened constantly by alternatives that present themselves to the imagination. Reading and listening seem to involve a constant struggle to stay in tune, to control fading in and out of the primary activity. The struggle is quite human. Further, the effort to focus attention may not succeed but, even within the greater crisis of being truly bored, one may in fact be learning or doing something relevant, even if to a casual observer, the case may seem quite the opposite.

Students who seem bored may be carrying on mental activities relevant to the matter at hand. Here, for example, is an account of one student's boredom, based on an interview by another student:

> When Mike is bored in his architecture class, he will take out his mechanical pencil, count the number of clicks it takes in order for the lead to fall out, and then after all of the lead has fallen out, he will clean the grime from underneath his fingernails with the pointed end of his pencil. Mike will often grasp his eyelids between his thumb and forefinger, and will then listen for the suction noise when he gently pulls his eyelid away from his eyeball. Sometimes Mike will take off his multi-colored Swatch watch, clean out the filth hidden inside the hinge between the plastic watchband and the face of the watch, open the battery compartment, and finally read the print on the battery itself. What does Mike think about when examining his watch? Mike says that he often creates new designs for the face of his watch in his mind.

Boredom is so common for Mike that he has developed relatively pleasurable activities that can be carried on while the sanctioned one, a class, is also going on. His instructor might think Mike rude, alienated, dull-witted, and a candidate for some other major. But he is not alienated, at least not from architecture, since he is practicing related, even creative activities. He is doing what a bored architect might do. As I suggested above, investigating boredom may lead both students and their instructor to a new understanding of what seems to be going on in classrooms and in themselves.

## Collaborative Exploration of Boredom

My frustration with the scholarship on boredom encouraged me to bring the topic into writing classes, which I have done at various levels, usually in a modified workshop setting. Ordinarily we pursue the topic for two or three weeks, and the project is meant to be both individual and collaborative, so that discussions and writings provide material that everyone may use in exploring the topic and in formulating some tentative conclusions about it. After explaining what we are up to, I have sometimes begun by asking students to list familiar phrases describing boredom, such as, "bored silly" or "bored to death" and to list things that they find boring, perhaps just by filling in the blank in "____ is boring." We may try other syntactic arrangements, perhaps with "bore" as a verb and begin inventing possibilities not heard before. In any case, it doesn't take long to fill up a blackboard with sentences and phrases both familiar and new. We might conclude that boredom is common, that it occurs in certain settings, that it seems unpleasant, that we have a number of familiar ways of describing it.

The first writing assignment asks students to write about their own personal experience of boredom outside of the classroom. I start there because I have in mind a second agenda, which is to get students to think about their experience, verbal and felt, both inside and outside the academy, to try to help them connect what they learn spontaneously and voluntarily with their schoolwork. In any case, this first assignment leads to surprisingly good writing. While bored people may be suffering and seem detached from the prevailing activity, the experience is intense for them, easily recalled and reconstructed. Some situations students describe are predictable, such as the boredom of waiting in an office, where details of the room become suddenly a matter for intense concentration. One student writes:

> As I waited for my mother to return through the swinging doors, I found that there were fourteen panels of the lowered ceiling running the length of the waiting room. The magazine table was full of a variety of magazines for readers of any age. They were scattered as little children went through them time after time. The older people waiting in the room seemed to be dozing, and I wondered

> if that was because the clock was moving slower than usual. The sounds coming from behind the receptionist's window seemed to take on a rhythm, and a low buzz of voices could be heard coming from that direction.

Looking at this sample, we observe that boredom tends to sharpen focus on particulars in the environment, which is replicated in the writing (without any exhortation to "use details"). We might notice that the narrative becomes surreal as the writer's mind assumes that the whole world runs to its clock. The sense of time slowing down will reappear.

If prompted, or often without being asked, students will describe the inventive strategies they have for dealing with boredom (which, again, leads to engaging writing). One student, riding in the cold across Nebraska, tries to judge how low the outside temperature is by how cold the side of his head is. Then he thinks about an article he has read on Donald Trump and plays the part. He writes, "I've just named everything I own after myself. I'm on this incredible ego trip, a trip within a trip." It is worth noting—especially since most of my students insist that their schooling makes no difference in their lives, arguing that they are shaped only by home and experience outside the academy—that this student's strategies spring from his study of science and his reading.

Some students need such strategies because they are often bored. Other students, however, are rarely bored and look down on those who experience boredom. As suggested above, boredom is stigmatized and is partly taboo as a topic. In fact, there is an advantage to asking students initially for just one incident of boredom, since they then don't have to say how chronic their boredom is and reveal too much of what some classmates (and teachers) will regard as a weakness.

At this point I usually ask students to write about their personal experience of academic boredom. This is an easy topic for them and leads to amusing (and to a teacher, painful) accounts of classrooms. The assignment gives one more glimpse into what Robert Brooke, after Erving Goffman, calls the "underlife" of classrooms ("Underlife and Writing Instruction"). Some students write about being trapped where nothing of significance to them is happening. A student in a large lecture class writes about rubbing her nose and looking around to see if there might

be something interesting going on, ready to create if she finds nothing. "Hmm," she writes, "not really, although I think the girl in front of me may have died. There doesn't appear to be any sign of life. Just to be obnoxious, I give the seat ahead of me a savage kick. Startled, the girl sitting in it whips around and gives me an icy stare. 'Ahem, excuse me. Sorry to interrupt you,' I say, smiling sweetly." Boredom is linked with death, but the victim revives. And the tormentor-investigator is ready to transform her action sweetly into a mistake. This is a complicated bit of activity running against the grain of the classroom.

It is easy to fault a student who torments another instead of paying attention to the subject at hand. On the other hand, students report falling into such states as often through their inability to understand what is being said as from its apparent simplicity or irrelevance. David Punter remarks that "lecturing is a passive-aggressive mode of relating; all fantasy power is invested in the lecturer, while the member of the audience is allowed to experience total irresponsibility" ("University English Teaching" 218). Surely part of students' difficulty is that, as Punter remarks, the student "is now reminded of a childlike state, in which almost no action, including leaving the room, produces any effect on the lecturer" (218). Yet students usually have some responsibility for the content of the lecture. In that sense they are not free to be irresponsible. Further, they often want to know and understand what is being said. Students often struggle to keep up with the ideas being presented and discover that they cannot. My students are ready to declare that the feeling of boredom can come as much from being too severely challenged as from being too little challenged.

Again, students write and talk about a wondrous range of strategies to keep themselves focused or at least to keep themselves from being discovered. One student's father told her she could keep alert when driving by keeping her eyes moving. She tries the same strategy in classes, shifting her eyes to the list of elements on the wall, to the clock, to the blackboard, trying to drive through the long night of her chemistry class. Another student describes what happens to her in a science classroom where most fellow students are falling asleep. She observes other students closely, noting the drawing of a band's name that one student is making, reading the anarchistic slogans on his jeans, and eying his cross earring. She decides to stay awake and in

order to do so diverts her attention from the professor. She tries an academic exercise first, reading the chart of the elements behind him, trying to recall the elements from their symbols: "That soon became tiresome so I let my mind drift and began to imagine myself as a daughter of a nobleman in the Middle Ages in England who was being held prisoner by another nobleman for a ransom of land. It was as if I was watching a movie like the one I saw a few nights ago, 'Excalibur.' The fantasy ended at the point I was trying to escape with the evil nobleman's son on horseback when the bell rang." Students are willing to see learning or self-improvement in their efforts. One writes: "I think that boredom is not all bad, because it may cause you to be more creative. If you are bored, you will have to think of things to do and that isn't all bad because you can use your imagination, and I think that is good." Of course, students' desire to occupy themselves, to prevent their minds from going dead, is complicated by their social setting, by their need to appear to be alert, to be good students, or to be detached, depending on how they wish to define themselves in relation to the class.

Boredom is constantly being masked so that the perception of an observer is easily misled. To explore this point, I once asked a group of students sitting together to mimic boredom. They leaned back in their chairs and struck familiar poses. Some leaned back, feigning sleep or indifference, while others began fidgeting. Then we refined the activity by asking them to show us boredom that does not want to be noticed. They slipped into postures that are also familiar in classrooms, holding their hands over their eyes, picking up a pencil to look busy, fixing their eyes on some point near the front of the room. Then we asked for boredom that wants to be noticed. Again, the gestures are like those we all see at the end of a class, tapping of pencils, staring visibly at watches, twitching legs. At this point, some of them began talking or making noises. Finally, I was inspired to ask them to imitate the opposite of boredom. They instantly came upright in their chairs, sat with pencils poised, staring at the teacher and smiling. I nearly fell over because this was a powerful set of gestures seldom encountered in a classroom.

Having explored boredom as personal experience, we have often moved to trying to observe it in others. One way of doing so is through informal research, by having students interview other students about their boredom or by observing students

directly. We move from introspection and memory to observation of others. Mike, the bored architecture student, came to us from an interview. Another student finds an acquaintance for whom boredom is especially threatening: "'When I'm alone and "bored," I think about so many things,' she told me. "'I often think, "Why haven't my friends called?" or "Do my friends really like me?" I start contemplating my place in life, why I'm on this planet, that sort of thing. I consider suicide because life seems so stagnant and pointless. Boredom really opens my eyes to all my inner weaknesses, because it gives me time to think about them.'" Students may also be encouraged to interview others, people where they work, older acquaintances, or family. One student found a forty-year-old housewife who is bored all the time despite the fact that she chases two young children all day. Another found a sixty-nine-year-old retired factory worker who finds himself bored often since retirement, "depressed about being bored and bored with being depressed." Another student interviewed people in her dorm, trying to get them to identify what they found boring and then to say whether they thought the causes were internal or external (they split, and a number thought both causes operated).

One of our efforts in this project is not simply to create narrative accounts and other descriptions of boredom but also to reflect on the experience described. (I am working in a tradition of reflexive writing, most explicitly in the tradition of freshman—there were no freshwomen there at the time—English at Amherst College, from which are descended William Coles's sequences of assignments, and through them David Bartholomae and A. Petrosky's. See, for example, Coles's *The Plural I* and Bartholomae and Petrosky's *Facts, Artifacts and Counterfacts*). Generalizations flow naturally out of our discussions and reading of each others' work. In addition, we try to test generalizations more carefully, to match them with the personal and collective experiences we gather. One strategy for doing so involves simply asking students to write a final separate paragraph, at the end of a narrative or interview, commenting on its meaning. These paragraphs invite readers to assess their accuracy and relevance.

In reflecting on and generalizing about boredom, students face certain difficulties. As might be expected, explanations get mixed up with blame. In discussion or through writing, a conflict

emerges between those who claim never to be bored and those who report being bored all the time. One way of dealing with these conflicts is to set up a panel representing both sides. The contrasts can be quite striking. One student panelist describes how she is bored all the time. One especially vigorous young man says he is never bored, and class members hone in on him. What do you do when you have to wait for someone, they ask. I plan my life, he says. For example, he continues, if I have to wait for my younger brother, who is always late, I figure out how to deal with my schoolwork. What do you do when he is really late? I plan way ahead. What do you do when he finally comes, the instructor asks. I open the car door for him and ask him how he is.

Many classmates shake their heads in disbelief. But this young man, like a group of his classmates, tends to be scornful in turn of those who, from their point of view, give in to boredom. One of them remarked, originally I think, "Only truly boring people get truly bored." This conflict leads to discussion of and writing about where responsibility for boredom lies. The disagreement often, but by no means always, follows gender lines, with young women trending to feel that the individual is to blame for being bored, while young men tend to blame anything but themselves. A young woman once wrote that no subject is so boring that you cannot find a way to make it interesting. A young man was led nearly to shout, "Chemistry is inherently boring!" These conflicts arise naturally, and students show a genuine curiosity about the differences among themselves revealed by them.

Usually I ask students to write one final piece formulating what they have learned about boredom. At this point the temptation is to push my own agenda, to ask them then to create a hypothesis about boredom, explaining its essential nature or some significant part of it. I want to ask them how they would test their hypotheses. But I find I can credit more of their learning if I let them write about what they have learned in a broader sense and in an appropriate form. If they want to create a hypothesis, they may do so. If they want to write a letter to a professor or professors who are boring, they may do that. If they want to record their learning in a learning log, where they may say what they feel they have learned no matter how relevant it seems to my plans, they should. Some students may want to

give advice to bored students, while a budding social scientist may want to lay out plans for further research.

## Boredom, Flow, and Writing

In some cases I have delayed this last piece of writing in order to ask students first to consider "flow" activities, which makes it easier to integrate the topic of writing itself into our project. My reading in boredom led me to the work of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. He has studied activities that are inherently absorbing, like rock climbing, painting, or doing surgery, activities at the farthest remove from boredom (see *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety*). Most students know one or two such activities, and, unfortunately, most of them do not take place as part of their formal education. In asking students to write about this subject, I find it useful to follow the pattern of our boredom assignments, asking them first to describe a flow activity from outside the university, seeking again to connect voluntary, self-motivated learning with academic learning. While this task might appear to be a version of "My Favorite Hobby," the challenge to a writer is considerable.

One quality of "flow" activities is that they are not self-conscious. Further, they are often filled with details obvious to the participant but requiring careful description for a neophyte reader. Still, even when the writing is not as good as it might be, it has the positive effect of letting everyone be an expert on something. (Donald Murray, in *A Writer Teaches Writing* has a less sharply focused exercise for the first day of class in which people get to name their expertise [79-80].)

My next step is to ask students to write about a "flow" activity within the academy, in the realm of their studies. For some students this task seems impossible. They cannot imagine being absorbed in their school-work. Others know right where to go, to their easels or their test tubes or their math problems. At this point, if the students haven't begun doing so themselves, I turn their attention to their own writing activities. They may well have noticed that writing is like other activities they have been describing, sometimes a flow activity, sometimes one involving anxiety and avoidance if not downright boredom. As mentioned above, they have by now remarked the extent to which conversation is an important factor in boredom. Finding

someone to talk to relieves boredom, while being forced to talk with persons who force upon them some alien identity is discomforting and often called "boring." Goffman describes the intensity of engagement in conversation, noting that "as a main focus of attention talk is unique, however, for talk creates for the participant a world and a reality that has other participants in it. Conjoint spontaneous involvement is a *unio mystico*, a socialized trance" (*Alienation* 47). Writing can, of course, be similarly engaging and create at least a semi-socialized trance, because it involves, if not other people, at least shared language and the implied presence of others. As writers, students need to feel that their writing is engaging them with someone else. When it does not do so or when the language they write is not one they are comfortable with, then they are likely to show symptoms like those of boredom. At the same time, writing, like talk, has a surprising capacity to involve the writer.

Students are likely to notice that writing can overcome them, almost unbidden. Here is Lisa writing about writing a paper on boredom:

> I had survived a classic case of boredom. Family gatherings. I didn't want to write on them as a whole being boring, but I couldn't help thinking of a certain incident that came up that started out as boring, but took a surprising turn. I found myself again furiously typing my thoughts on paper. I think I spent more time on this portion of my paper than the other, because I was all the time being conscious of what I was saying about my family. I was also feeling some guilt about saying that my family was partly boring, since my grandmother LIVES for family gatherings. After completing the summary, I sat and read my entire paper. It was at this time that I realized how tired I was. I also listened hearing Ashley still laughing about something in the next room. I had blocked out all outside noises and really felt like I had accomplished something. This is a kind of academic "rush" that I don't usually come across often.

She has written successfully about boredom and then about the process of writing that lay behind her work. She has come to recognize that writing can be a "flow" activity, can cause an academic rush that blots out everything else. Students' remarks

about the ability of writing to absorb them and focus their minds certainly confirms the effectiveness of practices that involve writing in the classroom itself as a support for discussion and learning. Certainly when students are writing in class, even during essay exams, they are more likely to lose track of time than when engaged in any other activity.

## Generalizations about Boredom

I indicated above that the professional literature on boredom is not very helpful, but it does provide some generalizations that students can test, and many that they confirm or arrive at independently. As both students and the professional literature indicate, boredom has a wide range of working definitions, with important common threads running through them. For example, in *Up from Boredom, Down from Fear*, Leckart and Weinburger list types connected to different contexts, each of which "produces a unique pattern of emotions, behaviors and thoughts" (31). They list, for example, intellectual boredom, life-style boredom, life-stages boredom, and fear-induced boredom. The risks are that the list can be extended infinitely and that the common features of boredom will be obscured. (One can make a ready game of inventing new and outrageous types of boredom. My colleagues vote for "committee boredom.") In *Boredom, Self, and Culture*, Sean Healy makes a useful distinction among three types of boredom (42-44). In the first, the victim knows what is boring and what will terminate the episode. In the second, the victim does not know what the cause is, but the episode ends relatively quickly. The third variety is hyperboredom, whose victims are "prey for no discernible reason to indifference, apathy, lethargy, torpor, total nonvolition, affectlessness, or subject to an active *counter*volition, a desire to be free from some indefinable incubus, some corrosive irritant. This is an affect, but it is an affect without effectiveness in locating the source of the trouble" (44). Hyperboredom is *accidia*, the sin of boredom of the desert fathers, and *ennui* in more modern times, and is akin to depression. Though Healy and others see hyperboredom as a mark of modern culture, most students do not seem to fall into this state—and those who do are in need of more help than a writing teacher can give—, though they seem to suffer the other two, more temporary kinds all the time.

Boredom in any guise involves feelings of suffering and discomfort, of disengagement, of coercion or constraint, and of frustration. The victim has difficulty attending to the activity at hand, which he or she usually finds monotonous and uninteresting. Aaron H. Esman confirms some students' view that boredom depends on an interplay between the person and the situation, not on either alone ("Reflections on Boredom" 427). Monotonous situations do not necessarily cause boredom, just as apparently exciting ones may not keep it at bay.

As students constantly show, the sense of coercion and suffering may be exacerbated by the presence in the imagination of alternative activities, from which one is being kept by present circumstances. (In "Boredom: The Most Prevalent American Disease," Estelle R. Ramey speaks of the "envious awareness of more exciting possibilities" [14]). Thus while one wants to escape, one may feel or actually be constrained, for social or physical or psychological reasons, to continue an activity that requires effort to attend to. In addition, self-consciousness often increases, and, as students know well, time slows down. One student expresses both the sense of constraint and the diversionary strategies of the mind: "To me boredom is a state of internal upheaval. Your body and mind want to do something, but you are just unable to think of anything. In reaction to this, the mind will drift off on its own, in effect, acting as a pressure release valve for all internal pressure." The ability of the mind to drift off when it is not engaged makes teaching and learning difficult and cries out for a pen (or keyboard) to stop or, on the other hand, to follow the wandering.

The difficulty in attending to the present situation may turn into an active rejection of it, to what Healy calls a *counter*volition (44). Kuhn points out that one of the qualities of accidia is that "the bored person, alienated from his fellow man, feels himself misunderstood. He holds his peers and superiors in contempt and considers himself as being far better than they. On the basis of these sentiments, Cassian concludes that acedia can lead to the most serious sin of all, the one for which Satan was expelled from heaven, pride" (Kuhn 52). A form of pridefulness goes with the common feeling of contempt for the person or persons responsible for the activity that has become boring and for those who continue to participate in it, which *may* spill over into self-contempt. With help from Petrarch and the Romantics, we see

that the victim may also take pleasure in his or her own sufferings (see Mark D. Altschule "Acecia: Its Evolution from Deadly Sin to Psychiatric Syndrome" [79]). Most students, however, stop short of self-contempt.

In fact, what is remarkable is how hard they struggle to overcome boredom. One writes:

> I believe boredom is an internal struggle. I do not think there is a 'boring' situation. Instead, I think what causes us to be bored is that our perception of the situation is tainted. We're not willing to become actively involved in the situation in order to create and maintain interest, we're not well-informed participants in the situation, and our minds seek and focus on other, more pleasant situations, causing us to rebel against the current situation and thus become bored. I believe if we were able to actively combat a situation by equipping ourselves with the above actions and mindset, we could overcome boredom. Unfortunately, we are lazy and find it easier to fall back into boredom. Boredom *is* an internal struggle.

The student puts responsibility on herself for the difficulty, which may be admirable but unfair, and yet she emphasizes the struggle. What she records is not so different from what J. Hillis Miller says of the difficulties of reading and reflecting on reading and the danger of getting it wrong, "perhaps through fatigue or boredom or anxiety, or as a result of some other weakness preventing one from keeping one's mind on the topic, in place, so to speak. The attractions of inattention are immense, and we are likely to be, like Joseph K. in my epigraph, too tired to follow out all the pathways of thought into which a given story leads" (*Ethics of Reading* 3). Students do not seem so different from their teachers.

It is impossible to study boredom with students and not have a changed view of classrooms, both of what goes on in them and of what might be done to increase engagement. As I have suggested, writing offers a powerful tool for engaging students, which is reflected at a low level in their notetaking and even doodling or drawing. Certainly a workshop where students can converse with peers makes new sense. In addition, a lot of underlife activity may be much more in tune with the

primary activity than one suspects. Mike, staring at his watch, may be redesigning its face. On the other hand, the ease with which we all can slip away when we are not actively engaged is frightening. For me, the revealing moment came in my own class where I sat among students for a presentation by one of them. I relaxed and after some moments suddenly realized that I was not paying any attention to what the student was saying. Fighting a rush of adrenaline, I did what students do. I picked up my pen and started taking notes, doodling, scribbling (which Csikszentmihalyi says creates "microflow" [*Beyond Boredom* 141]). I saw with a new clarity that as a teacher, in the midst of performance, I am the most fully engaged person in the room, the most likely to feel myself in the "flow." Finally, my partial answer to the question of what students mean when they say something is boring is that they mean they are like the rest of us, only they don't have as much control over their lives and over what they are supposed to think about and, unlike their instructors, they don't get to engage in talk all the time.

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