African American Women and Education:
Marita Bonner’s Response to the “Talented Tenth”

by Judith Musser

Alain Locke’s call for the “New Negro” and W. E. B. Du Bois’s classification of “the Talented Tenth” created a myriad of creative interpretations during the Harlem Renaissance, especially by women writers. Marita Bonner’s work responds to the need for an examination of the lives of characters who must cope with economic hardships, discrimination, deterioration of family relationships, illnesses that are particular to urban life, new religious communities, and multi-ethnic neighborhoods within urban settings. Her themes are unique in comparison to stories written by other African American women. She is the only Harlem Renaissance woman to write short stories set in Chicago. Although she follows the African American women’s writing tradition in portraying women as her main characters, these women are not independently strong, not individualized and not triumphant. She avoids any autobiographical elements from her distinctive childhood. She adheres to a social-realist mode of writing about multi-ethnic Chicago, an environment that directs not only her themes, but her craft as well. Her stories present a unique perspective on the struggles of those twentieth-century African Americans who live outside the Mecca of art in Harlem, who do not live in all-African American rural communities, who must face a completely different set of Jim Crow laws from those of the post-Civil War South, and whose daily existence depends on the economic prosperity of Midwestern industry. In particular, several of Bonner’s short stories reflect the often overpowering barriers that African American women faced when they attempted to follow the Harlem Renaissance’s call for self-improvement through education.

Locating Bonner in the history of African American writing is essential to understanding both her short fiction and the sociological map of the Renaissance era. She lived during the Harlem Renaissance, published in two of the leading African American journals (Opportunity and The Crisis), participated in writing groups such as Georgia Douglas Johnson’s “S” Street
Salon, and lived in three urban settings (Boston, Washington, DC and Chicago) that were centers for vigorous African American reform activities. She was a contemporary of such well-known women Renaissance writers as Zora Neale Hurston, Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Gwendolyn Benet, Dorothy West, and Ann Petry. She was the most prolific woman short story writer for *Opportunity*, publishing seven short stories whereas the average for other women writers was one to two stories. Compared to male short story writers, Bonner's total publication number for *Opportunity* was exceeded by only two—Henry B. Jones and John Frederick Matheus, who each published nine stories.

Until at least 1987, Bonner was unknown to contemporary readers. With the publication of her works in the Beacon Press Black Women Writer's series, her short stories have begun to appear in anthologies. Not surprisingly, scholarship on Bonner has been slight. Cheryl Wall's more recent book *Women of the Harlem Renaissance* discusses Bonner's essay "On Being

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1 According to Lewis (127), Georgia Douglas Johnson's "Saturday Nighters" used to meet "[i]n the living room of her S Street house behind the flourishing rose bushes, a freewheeling jumble of the gifted, famous, and odd came together on Saturday nights. There were poets Waring Cuney, Mae Miller, Sterling Brown, Angelina Grimke, and Albert Rice. There were the artists Richard Bruce Nugent and Mac Howard Jackson. Writers like Jean Toomer and Alice Dunbar-Nelson (former wife of Paul Laurence Dunbar), and philosopher-critic Locke came regularly to enjoy the train of famous and to-be-famous visitors. Langston Hughes used to bring Vachel Lindsay; Edna St. Vincent Millay and Waldo Frank came because of Toomer; James Weldon Johnson and W. E. B. Du Bois enjoyed their senior sage role there; occasionally, Countee Cullen and, more often, the suave Eric Walrand accompanied Locke. Rebecca West came once to encourage Georgia Johnson's poetry. H. G. Wells went away from one of the Saturday nights saddened by so much talent straining to burst out of the ghetto of American arts and letters.

2 There is no concrete evidence to show that Hurston and Bonner ever met, although they both participated in Johnson's gatherings on "S" Street. On the other hand, one wonders if Hurston's use of the name "Matt Bonner" in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* indicates that she knew Bonner, or at least Bonner's reputation as a writer.

3 Bonner, *Frye Street and Environs*. All quotations from Bonner's short stories are taken from this text.

4 For example, six collections have each included one of her short stories or essays: Clarence Major's *Calling the Wind* (1993), a collection of twentieth-century African American short stories, includes one of Bonner's first publications—"The Hands — A Story"; Regina Barreca's *Women of the Century* (1993), a collection of modern short stories by women, includes one of Bonner's later stories, "Reap It As You Sow It"; three anthologies—Margaret Busby's monumental anthology of writings by women of African descent, *Daughters of Africa* (1992); the 1994 *Harper American Literature* (McQuade et al.); and Charlotte Nekola and Paula Rabinowitz's *Writing Red* (1987), an anthology of proletarian women writers—include one of Bonner's essays, "On
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Bonner's pre-publication life is important when one considers her presentation of education in the lives of her characters. She does not incorporate her own family into her stories, and she does not draw on her own early experience as a teacher. Her own mother died in 1924 of a brain hemorrhage when Marita was 25, and her father died two years later. Bonner's daughter believes that these premature deaths (her parents were only 53 and 55) were traumatic for Marita because she was now "left alone and struggling" (Roses and Randolph 167). None of Bonner's stories confronts this issue. Very little is known about Bonner's relationship with her mother except for the only counsel given by her mother: "be sweet and that way people will like you" (Roses and Randolph 166). Her mother, Mary A. Nowell, was from Petersburg, Virginia. Mary Nowell's mother was a free woman who married a slave. The marriage made the groom, Marita's grandfather, a free man and obliged him to adopt his wife's surname. Slavery stories were common plots in African American fiction by this time, but none of Bonner's fiction reaches back in history to this period of oppression. In contrast to the small number of fathers in Bonner's work, almost every story has a mother as one of the main characters. Bonner focuses mainly on injustices and prejudices that African Americans face in the present, not the past. This focus, moreover, is gendered. The stories center upon women who must battle extreme economic conditions to raise their children, but, ironically, it is usually the children who die, not the parent. It is also important to note that her mother's advice concerning how to get along with people is a philosophy that Bonner's characters do not adhere to, especially the women. In Bonner's fictive world, sweetness is not recommended as a survival trait. It is clear that Bonner did not recreate her parents in her characters. As for her siblings, there is no information concerning her brothers, but according to Roses and Randolph (166) Bonner did have trouble getting along with her sister Bernice:

Marita was a gifted pianist who vied with her sister, Bernice, and sometimes surpassed her, in performing skill. But she always felt that Bernice, the beautiful sister, with her "classic" features and
personal experiences for the plots, settings and themes. The violence and poverty of inner-city life found in her stories are not part of her early life experiences. In fact, her childhood and education could be considered privileged. Unlike most of the women Renaissance writers, Bonner was not raised in the South. Her roots are in New England, in her father’s family. Her father, Joseph Bonner, a native Bostonian born in 1872, attended the Boston Latin School for boys but did not finish high school. According to Roses and Randolph, his occupations were “laborer” and “machinist” (166). Joseph Bonner worked long and hard to support his growing family—Joseph, Jr. (b. 1893), Bernice Annette (b. 1895), Marita (b. 16 June 1889), and Andrew, who died in infancy—and to provide them with the education that he had not received. The portrait of a father who had a “steady income” (Roses and Randolph 167), was supportive of his family, was faithful to his wife until death, and encouraged education for his children, is not one that appears in his daughter’s fiction. Even locating characters in Bonner’s fiction who are fathers is difficult. Of the 15 stories that include a family group, only three present a character whose roles include that of father, and none of these examples appears to be reminiscent in any way of Bonner’s father.

For example, one father, Jimmie Joe’s “Pa” in “Tin Can,” fights a constant war with his wife over the education of his sons:

Pa maintained a colored boy did not need high school—like Jimmie Joe was getting—nor even junior high school—where Little Brother was—to do the kind of work a colored man could get to do. All you needed was a little reading so you could find a “Help Wanted” sign and get on the right street cars and a little number- ing “so’s these sheenies” could not cheat you in the stores! (122)

Reuben Jackson, father of Denny in the story “Nothing New,” like Jimmie Joe’s father, does not see any advantage in an African American person’s pursuing an education. Denny’s creativity is released through his art and music, but his parents are not sympathetic to his imaginative abilities. In

violet eyes, was the favored child . . . [Marita] continued to feel deeply envious of Bernice, to the point where relations between them became strained; the adult Marita had face-to-face contact with her sister only once, during a family trip east in 1940. When Bernice died in 1957, Marita flew to Boston for her funeral.

Nowhere does Bonner incorporate this sibling rivalry into her fiction; in fact, she seems to avoid any family constructions that include sisters. There is only one story (“The Whipping”) in which a family with three children, two sisters and a brother, travels to Chicago. But the older sister soon leaves home and nothing is heard of her again.
contrast to his son, Reuben is described as someone who "[didn’t] know much. He knew only God, work, church, work and God" (69). He criticizes his son for being too effeminate—"Why don’t you run and wrestle and race with the other boys? You must be a girl. Boys play rough and fight!" (70). When Denny chooses to attend art school, Reuben doesn’t believe he will learn anything useful there. Reuben believes that Denny should "go somewhere and do some real man’s work" (73) instead of attending school. David’s father in the story "The Makin’s" does not work hard to support his family, let alone save money for the future education of his children. When David sheepishly asks to borrow a dime in order to buy some seeds, his father replies, "Aw, how the hell you think I gonna give you a dime out of this damn measly dollar a day I get for you to throw away? Here! Go get me two good packages of cigarettes, and if Sam ain’t got em, go somewhere’s else!" (181). Joseph Bonner, on the other hand, stressed the importance of education. He worked to secure a livelihood that ensured that all of his children attended college, including his daughters Bernice, who graduated from the New England Conservatory of Music, and Marita, who graduated from Radcliffe.

Bonner’s fictional depiction of a father’s lack of support for education is not an autobiographical representation, but a sociological one. According to Jacqueline Jones (97), African American mothers were far more likely to support education for their children. Frances Harper, an African American writer and lecturer, suggested that African American mothers "are the levers which move in education. The men talk about it . . . but the women worked most for it." She recounts examples of mothers who toiled day and night in the fields and over the washtub in order to send their children to school. One mother "urged her husband to go in debt 500 dollars" for their seven children’s education (Harper 10–11). Clide Vernon Kiser documents similar instances of this maternal educational philosophy. For example, the experiences of Martin V. Washington, one of 10 siblings, are not unusual. His mother had received a grammar-school education, but his father had never gone to school. "Because of the lack of his education," explained Washington, "my father was not anxious for his children to attend school; he preferred to have them work on the farm." On the other hand, his mother, "who knew the value of an education," tried to ensure that all of her children acquired some schooling (quoted in Kiser 248).

Bonner does not recreate her own academic successes in her fiction. Her childhood and education were in a predominantly middle-class community near Brookline, Massachusetts, whereas most of her fictional characters come from the lower class of Southern towns or Chicago’s working class. Bonner

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7Roses and Randolph believe it is probable that scholarship assistance was also provided from the family’s church, The Ebenezer Baptist Church in Boston.
wrote regularly for her high school magazine and was thus encouraged by a teacher to apply to Radcliffe. At Radcliffe, she became involved both academically and socially. She majored in English and comparative literature, was accepted into a competitive writing class taught by Charles Townsend Copeland,8 participated and received awards in musical clubs, and founded the Radcliffe chapter of Delta Sigma Theta, an African American sorority.

These accomplishments are important for two reasons. First, Bonner’s educational experience was unusual for an African American woman in the first half of the twentieth century. Statistics reveal that before the beginning of the twentieth century, only 2,079 African American people were recorded as having graduated from college (Willie 1). In 1917, there were 2,132 African Americans in college and 10 years later there were 13,580 (Lewis 157–58). By 1930, approximately 19,000 students were enrolled in African American colleges and the rate of illiteracy among African Americans had been reduced from 60% in 1895 to 25% by 1930 (Thomas 14). Although these numbers may look encouraging, by 1940, of all African Americans over 25, one in 10 had not completed a single year of school, and only one in a hundred had graduated from college (Cashman 71).

Twenty years before Bonner enrolled at Radcliffe, the following item appeared in The New York Times: “The graduates and students of Vassar College are much disturbed over a report that one of the members of the senior class of ’97 was of colored parentage” (Baker 194). Colleges had come a long way since 1897, but they still had a long way to go to combat racial prejudice. Bonner faced housing discrimination at Radcliffe, for she was enrolled during a time when African American students were not allowed to live in the dormitories.9 It was more difficult for African American women than men to obtain a college education. Oral histories of African American women poignantly reveal the hardships facing women who were attempting to obtain higher educational degrees during the early twentieth century.10

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8Ironically, Copeland warned Bonner not to be “bitter” in her writing. Her short stories reveal that she did not heed this advice.

9Bans on African American residency in dormitories was a particularly prominent issue among universities country-wide during the year of Bonner’s graduation from Radcliffe (1922). President Lawrence Lowell of Harvard was compelled “by Negrotarian alumni to rescind the dormitory ban . . . [and s]everal months later, Columbia University students burned a cross in front of Furnald Hall to force one Frederick Wells to move” (Lewis 159).

10One of the most recent (and delightful) oral histories is told by Sarah and A. Elizabeth Delany (Having Our Say), sisters who lived in Harlem during the height of the Harlem Renaissance. Sarah, or Sadie, was the first African American person ever to teach domestic science on the high school level in New York City public schools and her sister Bessie became the second African American woman licensed to practice dentistry in New York.
Second, and more important, Bonner’s fiction reveals a discrepancy between the idealism projected by the intelligentsia and the circumstances African American women encountered. In 1925, the leaders of the Negro Renaissance were heralding the rewards of an educated African American race with proclamations that “education... vindicated its claim as the process of unlocking and releasing the higher powers and faculties of human nature” (Locke 314). The promoters of the Harlem Renaissance, particularly Du Bois and Locke, encouraged African Americans to excel intellectually. Years earlier, Du Bois had written in *The Souls of Black Folk*:

And finally, beyond all this, it [education] must develop men. Above our modern socialism, and out of the worship of the mass, must persist and evolve that higher individualism which the centres of culture protect; there must come a loftier respect for the sovereign human soul that seeks to know itself and the world about it; that seeks a freedom for expansion and self-development; that will love and hate and labor in its own way, untrammeled alike by old and new. (83)

Education for progress was the ideal that united the Talented Tenth. But Bonner’s fiction does not participate in this tradition of encouragement and freedom of self-development. In fact, the three stories that deal with the topic of education for women portray how the realities of the world for women seem out of touch with the ideologies for an African American renewal.

In the last short story Bonner wrote (“Light in Dark Places”), educational values are degraded. Tina, a high school student, is beginning to prefer the attentions of a boy in class to the content of the lectures. She justifies her failure in school by pronouncing that “High school was too hard anyhow. Most of the girls left in their first year to work or to marry. Anything was better than messing with the *Odyssey* and parallelograms and quadratic equations and gym” (281). Tina’s assessment of classical education may have been common among lower class African Americans, but it was not what the leaders of the Harlem Renaissance were advocating at the time.

A gradual change in the educational philosophy of African Americans stemmed from Alexander Crumwell and Booker T. Washington’s self-help ideology at the turn of the century. Many African American leaders in colleges encouraged the concept of industrial education over a liberal arts education. Industrial education enjoyed widespread popularity, not only

11Lewis, however, suggests that Locke was a “certified misogynist” who “dismissed female students on the first class day with the promise of an automatic grade of C” (96). Gloria T. Hull (7) reports the words of Owen Dodson who explains that “He [Locke] didn’t believe in women’s lib for instance. If women enrolled in his classes as seniors, he’d say, ‘You come here at your own risk.’”
because it addressed the real needs of many African American colleges and their students, but also because it met the needs of dominant elements in the African American communities. Among African Americans, it was compatible with the concepts of self-help and racial solidarity. Industrial education had as its goal—the creation of a race of thrifty, hard-working, industrious men and women focusing their energies on economic advancement rather than on political equality. After Washington's death in 1915, however, his influence gradually declined and African Americans increasingly demanded a general education for their children. In addition, African Americans realized that "special education," as advanced by Washington, was inadequate to meet their needs as the demand for agriculture decreased and new jobs in manufacturing, trade, and industry appeared. This recognition was especially applicable to African Americans who had migrated from rural areas into developing industrial urban centers. Actually, Tina's assessment of education in Bonner's story disregards both the pro- and anti-industrial education views. She considers any education a waste of time, because she plans to marry and rely on her husband to support her financially. Bonner's fiction presents very few successful marriages, very few hard-working husbands, and all too many examples of uneducated women who are unqualified for employment beyond the kitchens of white people or the basements of factories and office buildings. Bonner is not presenting two sides of the educational debate on what will be offered in colleges. She is grappling with a more basic need for women—that of choosing to take education seriously, whether it be agricultural, industrial, general, traditional or untraditional.

Once a woman does decide to further her education, she is faced with another difficult predicament. For example, in a second story, "One True Love," Bonner presents a young woman who is inspired to advance her education and career, but she fails to overcome obstacles of poverty, poor educational fundamentals, and prejudice, and who, quite literally, dies through her efforts to be successful. Nora, a maid in a white household, observes a female guest of her employers and is impressed with the woman's character, appearance, and most important, position as a lawyer. Inspired by her, Nora decides to attend City College to study to be a lawyer. "City College," according to the narrator, "was not particularly glad to receive Nora. They endured a few colored students there but they had always been men—men whose background of preparation made professors and students of the lesser type keep their sneers under cover" (223). Nora's "struggle to get beyond a stove, a sink, a broom and a dust-mop and some one else's kitchen" (223) is unsuccessful because of her lack of educational background and, in part, her gender. She must also overcome her own ideological blindness, for she has regarded education as the panacea for all her problems. In a conversation with her boyfriend Sam, she proclaims, "If you are educated you know how to do everything just right all the time" (222). We are
told that she “worked hard at her books . . . [but] that she had to read ten times over to even begin to get a glimmer of sense from them” (223). Her efforts are not rewarded because “no preparatory steps had ever been laid in her, [and] Nora flunked all her examinations” (224). It is also ironic that Nora had chosen to study law, the system by which justice presumably is meted out to all people. Nora trusts this system—“I can lean on law” (224) she yells at Sam. Yet for uneducated African American women, the apparently impartial legal system is neither inclusive nor just. Eventually she dies from the strain of her studies, partly because she must attend night classes and can not maintain her work hours on the job, a problem that in turn reduces her income. Late hours and weakened physical condition take a physical toll, and she dies of pneumonia in the public ward of City hospital. Poor education, a frowned-upon southern dialect, lack of financial support, and no advice or help from a college are the barriers that young African American women like Nora fail to overcome. The story graphically illustrates the frustration of women who are constantly exposed to the better life as they work among the homes of white people but are unable to make a change.

In a third story (“Tin Can”), Bonner attacks the flaws of the educational system through her depiction of a sanctimonious principal of a segregated high school in the Black Belt. The narrator tells us that he obtained his position “by licking the boots of those above him and kicking the backs of those below, and by never walking upright where it would gain him a point to crook his spine physically and morally” (125). The students recognize his hypocrisy (they name him the “Black Bass Drum”) and ridicule his morning assembly speeches on character building. One student comments, “I sure don’t feel like hearing that character stuff today! I get damn sick of that Black Bass Drum telling you how much manners and stuff he’s got, and honest to God, when I used to work in his office on the switchboard, I’ve seen that nigger plug in his ’phone so he could listen to the teachers talk when they got an outside call!” (126). The indictment of this man by Bonner’s narrator is even more critical:

What character he might have once had, had long been swallowed up in a morass of petty littleness, snobbishness and downright silly conceit. He prided himself on three things: that he was a leading Negro—that is to say, he had been placed at the head of a school—; then he could never cease to marvel that though his own skin was jet Black his children had managed to be born with tawny skins, slightly darker than their fair mother’s. Finally, he could not forget that he was the first Black man born in a certain college town to graduate from a famous college. . . . You could not make him understand that something besides formal platform speeches should be done about the fact that there was a gang of boys in his school who stole everything from everybody. No teacher could
persuade him that instead of sending on inflated reports full of empty embroidered phrases—saying absolutely nothing—to the higher ups—somebody ought to appeal to someone to stop the growing menace of the spread of social diseases among students. He closed his eyes to the annual crop of unmarried mothers in the senior class, blamed the teachers because the general scholarship was unspeakably low—and never admitted that he had any vital part in all of these problems but to lead where his narrow soul dictated. (126–27)

The narrator’s criticism is particularly biting when she compares him to an “ostrich, sticking his head into a hollow hole—the height and depth of his particular brain capacity—while an overwhelming world and ocean full of a million new conditions were sweeping up on him” (127). She recognizes that the educators are out of touch with the students and their families directly involved with the educational system. She attacks those whose rhetoric disregards the realities of the lives of African American people.

Bonner emphasized education for her own children, as illustrated in the Occomy children’s description of their own childhood in which “education was taken seriously, and there was no question but that they would go to college” (Roses and Randolph 168). Yet she chose not to write about her own unique and privileged background or her own desire to encourage her children to continue their education. Instead she depicted the experience of the majority of African American women who were not exposed to educa-

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12Ralph Ellison in The Invisible Man will recreate this same type of African American leader in Dr. Bledsoe. The following passages reveal the similarities between the two men:

Going upstairs I visualized Dr. Bledsoe, with his broad globular face that seemed to take its form from the fat pressing from the inside, which, as air pressing against the membrane of a balloon, gave it shape and buoyance. “Old Bucket-head,” some of the fellows called him. . . . Influential with wealthy men all over the country; consulted in matters concerning the race; a leader of his people; the possessor of not one, but two Cadillacs, a good salary and a soft, good-looking and creamy-complexioned wife (100–01). . . . Hadn’t I seen him approach white visitors too often with his hat in hand, bowing humbly and respectfully? Hadn’t he refused to eat in the dining hall with white guests of the school, entering only after they had finished and then refusing to sit down, but remaining standing, his hat in his hand, while he addressed them eloquently, then leaving with a humble bow? (106) . . . I remembered how Dr. Bledsoe could quote from the Book during his speeches to the student body on Sunday nights. (162)
tion, not supported in their efforts to obtain an education, and unable to succeed if an education was offered. It is not an encouraging and uplifting depiction of a New Negro that Bonner presents.

If Bonner did not attempt to inspire underprivileged youth in her writing, she apparently did so in her teaching career. She taught in five different schools during her lifetime. While attending Radcliffe, she taught at a nearby Cambridge high school. After graduation, she taught for two years at the Bluefield Colored Institute in Virginia, then moved to Washington, DC, where she taught for six years at Armstrong High School. After her marriage to William Almy Occomy, Bonner and her husband moved to Chicago and raised three children. When her youngest child was almost school age, she returned to teaching. She was required by the Board of Education to take education courses, despite her Radcliffe degree and previous teaching experience. After completing these courses, "which she sometimes literally slept through and in which she drew A's" (Roses and Randolph 168), Bonner resumed her teaching at Phillips High School. The end of her teaching career is perhaps the most significant evidence of her commitment to those less fortunate—she taught educationally and mentally handicapped children for 13 years at the Dolittle School in Chicago.

The significance of Bonner's refusal to write from her experiences distinguishes her from other writers, in particular Hurston. Bonner's voice does not proclaim her own individuality. She does not publicize her "self." She is silent about her own familial, educational and regional environment, focusing instead on the lives of other women. Her fictional "voice" thus becomes the medium for the protests of the voiceless and powerless. In this regard, Bonner exhibits some characteristics of proletarian writers because she reflects the life of a cross section of a certain populace in order to write fiction that has social value. Her attempt to portray the African American woman's life stems not from patriotism or conformity to a fashionable prejudice, however, but from intense personal conviction. This conviction is revealed in her commitment to documentary and realistic portrayals of the conditions and circumstances she observed and which control her characters. Although she did not experience the social and economic struggles that many of these characters encounter, her exposure to these conditions through her employment in public schools and living in close proximity to the Black Belt in Chicago provided her with ample material for her fiction. Marita Bonner reallocates the goals of the leaders of the Harlem Renaissance as a way to focus attention on the neglected issues that African American women, in particular, had to face every day. While Garvey was rallying support for the founding of a new African state, while Locke was calling for "unlocking and releasing the higher powers and faculties of human nature," while Charles Johnson was encouraging political themes as the focus of the new writing, while W. E. B. Du Bois was calling upon education to develop a higher
individualism in men, Bonner was examining the realities of how this new program for education would present more challenges for African American women.

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