

# Everything I Never Told You

A NOVEL



Celste Ng

**FIRST YEAR AND COMMON READING RESOURCE GUIDE**

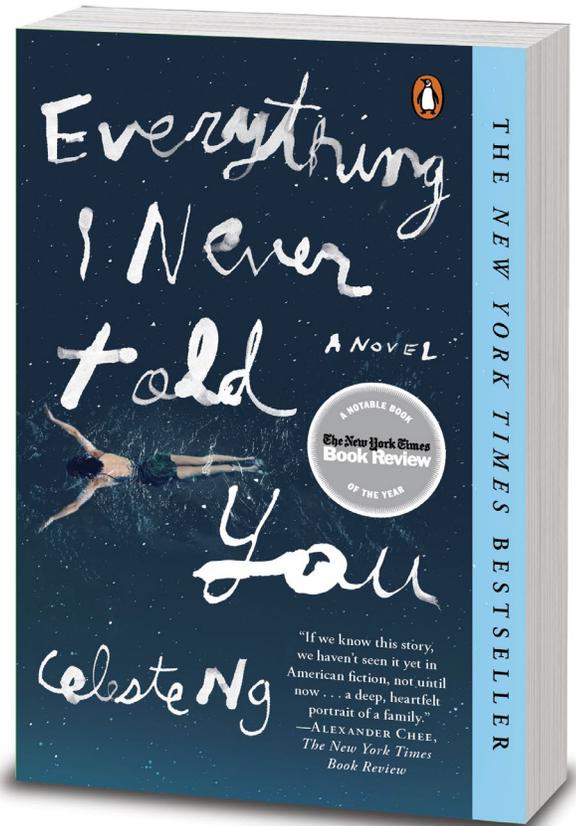
BY CHRIS GILBERT



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## I. INTRODUCTION

In the first sentence of Celeste Ng's *Everything I Never Told You*, the narrator reveals that Lydia is dead. As the narrative unfolds, the reader learns about the factors that led to the Asian American girl's demise, but the novel also invites the reader to consider a number of larger issues and themes. Ng's engaging work provokes an analysis of race, gender, the weight of family expectations, the power of stereotypes, and the significance of secrets and unfulfilled dreams. Although the novel takes place in the 1970s, students should find the book and its themes to be extremely relevant. Through the questions, activities, and resources featured in this guide, students are encouraged to adopt a critical view of both *Everything I Never Told You* and related personal experiences and societal issues. This guide contains five sections: discussion questions, classroom activities, research opportunities, service learning projects, and other resources for students, teachers, and programs. Each section is applicable to multiple curricular areas, and as such, this document has an interdisciplinary focus. Activities can also be easily modified and scaled, as they were constructed with flexibility in mind. Lastly, students are encouraged throughout to utilize technology and work collaboratively as they complete their First-Year Experience (FYE); this guide should provoke meaningful analysis and reflection, and it supports the overall purpose of the FYE: to fuse rigorous classroom study with immersive, communal learning experiences.



## II. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These questions can be posed to an entire class, given to small groups, used to initiate online discussions, etc.

1. Why do you think the book is titled *Everything I Never Told You*? How does the title pertain to different characters in the text?
2. At the beginning of the novel, the reader learns that Lydia is dead. What are the advantages of beginning the narrative with this information?
3. Compare and contrast Jack and Lydia. How do their behaviors and perspectives differ? What, if anything, do they have in common?
4. How are Marilyn and James influenced by their parents' experiences and expectations? How have your parents' expectations influenced you?
5. "And then, as if the tears are telescopes, she begins to see more clearly: the shredded posters and pictures, the rubble of books, the shelf prostrate at her feet. Everything that she had wanted for Lydia, which Lydia had never wanted but had embraced anyway. A dull chill creeps over her. Perhaps—and this thought chokes her—that had dragged Lydia underwater at last." (247) To what extent is Marilyn responsible for Lydia's death? In your opinion, who is largely to blame for her demise?
6. How would the Lee family's experiences differ if the narrative was set in present-day Ohio? How would gender roles and racial perceptions be different? How would the trajectories of the main characters be altered?
7. Why is Marilyn's mother's cookbook mentioned repeatedly in the novel? What other objects featured in the text are significant? How do they function as symbols?
8. How do you characterize the relationships between the three Lee children? How does each child affect the others in both positive and negative ways? If you have siblings, compare and contrast your relationships to the sibling relationships in the book.
9. How do various characters in the novel occupy the role of outsider?
10. After Lydia's death, how does each member of her family grieve?
11. How do James and Marilyn each feel about being "different"?
12. If you could ask Celeste Ng one question about *Everything I Never Told You*, what would you ask and why?

### III. CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

The following are short activities applicable to a variety of curricular areas.

#### 1. Student Generated Questions (QAR)

When students are able to generate their own questions, they are typically more invested in the analytical process. Allow them to take ownership of inquiry and explore *Everything I Never Told You* through this activity. QAR, which refers to Question-Answer Relationships, works well in terms of encouraging both close analysis and personal connections. These types of questions include:

- **Right there questions:** answers to these questions are found explicitly in the text.  
*Example:* Why does Marilyn decide to return to school?
- **Think and search questions:** answers lie in the text, but may only be found by examining several different sections and piecing them together.  
*Example:* How do James's childhood experiences affect him as an adult?
- **Author and you:** answers require personal interpretation based on textual evidence.  
*Example:* Which character reminds you of yourself or someone in your life?
- **On my own:** answers connect personal experience with themes of the text.  
*Example:* Have you ever felt alienated? Explain.

Have students work independently or in pairs to generate several questions per category for a specific section of the book. After these questions are generated, instructors have several options:

- Have students trade and answer each other's questions in writing.
- Have students submit questions on notecards, and randomly select several for formative assessments.
- Have students select one question to expand upon in an extended written response or brief presentation ("right there" questions do not work well for this).
- Have students answer each other's questions via collaborative documents on Google Docs (<http://docs.google.com>).\*

For more information on this strategy, consult this resource: <http://www.readingquest.org/strat/qar.html>

\*All Google resources mentioned in this guide are accessible with a free Google account.

#### 2. Test Yourself for Gender Bias

"She thought of her mother's cookbook: *Make somebody happy today—bake a cake! Bake a cake—have a party. Bake a cake to take to a party. Bake a cake just because you feel good today.* She pictured her mother creaming shortening and sugar, sifting flour, greasing a pan. *Is there anything that gives you a deeper sense of satisfaction?* There was Janet Wolff striding across the hospital waiting room, her coat so white it glowed." (96)

Because of her own beliefs regarding gender, family, and career, Marilyn is shocked to see a woman, Janet Wolff, working as a doctor. Have students examine their own attitudes about gender and its associations with career and family by taking the Gender-Career Implicit Association Test. This test was created by Project Implicit, a non-profit organization and collaboration between researchers interested in implicit social cognition. The Gender-Career test is designed to reveal thoughts and assumptions related to gender that exist outside of conscious awareness.

- To begin, direct students to <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>
- Next, tell students to select their country to continue as a guest; on the next screen, they will have to confirm they wish to proceed. Finally, when they see a list of tests, students should select the "Gender-Career IAT." This test should take students around ten minutes to complete.
- After they finish the test, ask students to discuss the following questions in small groups:
  - Overall, what sort of associations did the test reveal?
  - Were you surprised by the test results? Why? Why not?
  - Where do you think your biases regarding gender, career, and family come from?
  - How have these attitudes influenced your behavior?
  - Moving forward, how can you challenge your biases?
  - Choose two characters from the novel and discuss what you think their results would be if they took the test. What would the results reveal about them?

### 3. Create a Family Expectations Tree

“How had it begun? Like everything: with mothers and fathers. Because of Lydia’s mother and father, because of her mother’s and father’s mothers and fathers.” (25)

*Everything I Never Told You* explores the significance and consequences of familial expectations. Invite students to analyze this theme by creating a variation of a traditional family tree: a family expectations tree. Similar to the construction of a traditional family tree, this activity requires students to illustrate how different generations are linked; more importantly, though, this activity requires students to explore how familial expectations shape the anxieties, hopes, and behaviors of individual characters in the book.

- To begin, instruct students (individually or in small groups) to select one of the Lee children and answer the following questions about their selected character:
  - What are some of your character’s typical behaviors?
  - What are some of your character’s hopes and dreams?
  - What are some of your character’s fears and anxieties?
- Next, have students examine James and Marilyn while considering these questions:
  - What sort of pressure did James and Marilyn directly and indirectly exert on your character?
  - What were their hopes, fears, and expectations for your chosen character? How did these things affect your character?
- Finally, have students consider how James’s and Marilyn’s parents’ experiences, expectations, and anxieties shaped not only James and Marilyn, but also the Lee child at the center of their analysis. Have students explore the chains of experiences and related expectations that link child, parents, and grandparents to each other.
- To conclude, ask students to construct a family expectations tree to convey their analysis of the different Lee family generations. They can do so by hand or by using an online resource such as Family Echo (<http://www.family-echo.com/#edit:START>). Have them present their findings to the class.
- To extend this activity, have students construct their own personal tree to explore how multigenerational familial expectations have influenced them.

### 4. Compare and Contrast Asian American Experiences from #MyBananaStory

After reading *Everything I Never Told You*, have students access “My Banana Story” at <http://paradoxplatform.com/banana/>. A project created by Paradox, an Asian American sociopolitical rights organization at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, My Banana Story uses the banana (yellow on the outside, white on the inside) as a metaphor to help convey the inner turmoil and identity conflict that many Asian American students experience.

Have students access the site above, where they will be greeted by various images of Asian American students posing with bananas. When they click on an image, students will view an enlarged version of the image and a short narrative from the individual in the picture. Have students read through several of these stories.

Next, ask students to choose one specific narrative from the site to compare and contrast with a character’s experiences from the novel. To facilitate this process, instruct students to use a Venn diagram. In one circle, students should note unique aspects of the Asian American experience depicted in their chosen Banana Story; in the other circle, they should note unique aspects of a character’s experience from *Everything I Never Told You*. In the middle section of the Venn diagram, students should record similarities. Have students pair up and share their analysis before transitioning to a whole class conversation. Students could also further explore their noted similarities and differences through extended writing.

Lastly, if students are interested, encourage them to submit their own Banana Story to Paradox. Students who want to learn more about My Banana Story can visit <http://college.usatoday.com/2015/02/27/asian-american-students-share-their-struggles-in-mybananastory/>.

### 5. Remove the Mask

*Everything I Never Told You* features multiple characters who mask their true intentions, fears, and goals. Whether it be Marilyn’s desire to pursue her dream of becoming a doctor, or Lydia’s private promise to forever meet her mother’s expectations, the novel centers on characters who carefully conceal their internal lives by configuring their external performances. Have students explore this aspect of the text through the following activity:

- To begin, pair students up and have them select a main character from the text. Next, have students construct a simple T-chart (<http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/printouts/T-Chart.pdf>); have them label one side “inner” and the other side “outer.” On the “outer” side,

students should record how their selected character behaves. On the “inner” side, students should record the true motivation, emotion, etc. that is masked by their character’s contrived performance. For example, students could list Jack’s flirtation with various female characters in the outer column and his affection for Nath in the inner column. Encourage students to record several different examples in each column while supporting their ideas with textual evidence.

- ✦ Next, have students think of ways to represent each of their ideas visually through images or symbols. For instance, Jack’s affection for Nath could be symbolized by a heart, and Marilyn’s desire to pursue her goal of

becoming a doctor could be represented by a stethoscope.

- ✦ Finally, have students create a profile of their selected character’s head. Inside this profile, they should arrange their symbols in creative ways. By doing so, students craft a visual representation of what lies behind their character’s mask. Note that this part of the assignment can be created in a variety of ways. Students could use traditional art supplies such as construction paper, magazine cutouts, and markers. They could also use online resource such as Queeky (<http://www.queeky.com/>) or graphic design software such as Adobe Photoshop. To conclude the activity, encourage students to present their work to the class and explain the significance of their character profile and symbols.

## IV. RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

The following topics are designed to provide students with opportunities for extended inquiry and analysis. In response to these, students could:

- ✦ Compose a research paper
  - ✦ Deliver a presentation
  - ✦ Design a lesson plan and teach a class
  - ✦ Create a website (<http://www.weebly.com> and <https://sites.google.com> are excellent free resources for this)
1. Asian Americans are sometimes described as a “model minority.” Some research has even suggested that, as a racial group, Asian Americans are more likely to be viewed as advantaged than disadvantaged. Perform your own research and determine if the term “model minority” is appropriate. Additionally, consider the effects of this label. Does such a label ignore or downplay discrimination experienced by this group? Does this label unfairly stereotype all Asian Americans? Or, does this term simply celebrate their achievements?
  2. In “A Conversation with Celeste Ng,” Ng states, “It’s striking to remember that in her [Marilyn’s] time—just a generation ago—she had so many fewer paths open to her. But even with more options, we haven’t gotten this figured out yet, either. We’re still actively wrestling with the question of balance and women’s roles.... The debate over what women can and should do goes on.” (7) Analyze how cultural expectations for women have, and have not, changed since the 1970s. What opportunities for women exist now that did not exist then? Is it easier now for women to balance family obligations and professional

expectations and responsibilities? What needs to happen to help women achieve a better balance? Finally, how do changing dynamics for women affect men?

3. Spend some time researching yourself. More specifically, consider your racial and gender identifications and how they have informed your self-concept and life experiences. How have these aspects of your identity influenced your behavior, values, and interactions with others? How has your life’s trajectory been affected by your race and gender? Have your race and gender been sources of strength, anxiety, or a combination of both?
4. “Last week, at breakfast, Marilyn had leaned Lydia’s marked-up math homework against the box of Wheaties. ‘I checked it last night after you went to bed,’ she said. ‘There’s a mistake in number twenty-three, sweetheart.’” (164) Research parenting styles and their effects on children. What are the different types of parenting styles? Study these styles and apply your learning to the novel. Which parenting styles do James and Marilyn embody? Additionally, determine if there is a relationship between parenting style and academic success. In other words, can you identify any correlations between parental behaviors and a child’s academic performance? Consider Marilyn’s interactions with Lydia as you perform research.
5. Several characters in *Everything I Never Told You* experience racial microaggressions. Spend some time researching this phenomenon. What exactly are racial microaggressions? How common are they? In what ways do they damage and marginalize people? How can the public be better educated about them? How can this form of racism be combated?

## V. SERVICE LEARNING PROJECTS

These projects are designed to connect students' learning experiences with the larger community.

### 1. Take a Stand Against Racism

"To James, years of unabashed stares prickling his spine, as if he were an animal in the zoo, years of mutters in the street—*chink, gook, go home*—stinging his ears, *different* has always been a brand on his forehead, blazoned there between the eyes. It has tinted his entire life, this word...." (251)

Unfortunately, many students have likely had similar experiences. Encourage them to push back by taking a Stand Against Racism. Stand Against Racism is a campaign of YWCA USA (<http://www.standagainstracism.org/>) that is designed to build community and raise awareness about the negative impacts of various forms (institutional, structural, etc.) of racism. Since its start in 2007, Stand Against Racism has become a national campaign that has been adopted by schools, houses of worship, universities, businesses, and other organizations.

Invite students to design and promote their own Stand. Such an event can be of any size, and students could organize a variety of activities, including:

- Screen pertinent films and facilitate a related discussion.
- Invite participants to share poetry or deliver short speeches related to the fight against racism.
- Invite participants to bring and share foods that are representative of their own cultural backgrounds.
- Invite participants to write and perform songs against racism.
- Host a group discussion on related local, national, or global issues.

To help generate ideas for their event, direct students to <http://standagainstracism.org/successes-2015>. Here, they can learn about previous Stand Against Racism events.

Once students have established a plan for their own event, encourage them to visit <http://standagainstracism.org/ready-to-stand>. Here, they can read about registering and promoting their event on an interactive national map. Also, if students register their Stand, they will receive a toolkit of customizable materials including social media and press kits, resources for promoting advocacy, templates, and promotional materials.

### 2. Challenge Gender Stereotypes and Inequality

"Marilyn would not be like her own mother, shunting her daughter toward husband and house, a life spent safely behind

a deadbolt....She buried her nose in Lydia's hair and made silent promises. Never to tell her to sit up straight, to find a husband, to keep a house. Never to suggest that there were jobs or lives or worlds not meant for her; never to let her hear *doctor* and think only *man*. To encourage her, for the rest of her life, to do more than her mother had." (147)

Invite students to push back against gender stereotypes and inequality through their involvement with a gender equality organization. Two such organizations are HeForShe and The American Association of University Women (AAUW):

- HeForShe is an organization created by UN Women, the United Nations entity for the empowerment of women and gender equality. Since it asserts that gender equality is an issue that affects all people, HeForShe is particularly interested in mobilizing men and boys to help fight gender inequality. The organization started in 2014, and since then its presence can be felt at various locations, including college campuses, around the world. If your school does not already have one, invite students to create a HeForShe chapter. Through this chapter, students can host panel discussions, screen related films, launch social media campaigns, and invite the campus community to challenge gender inequality. Direct students to <http://www.heforshe.org/en> for more information. Lastly, encourage students to access the HeForShe Action Kits at <http://www.heforshe.org/action-kit> to help them plan and promote their events. Students may also benefit from seeing what other HeForShe-associated schools are doing:
  - Photo campaign at Duke University: <http://www.dukechronicle.com/article/2016/03/heforshe-brings-google-search-campaign-to-campus>
  - HeForShe STEM scholarships at the University of Waterloo: <https://uwaterloo.ca/news/news/university-waterloo-awards-heforshe-scholarships-outstanding>
  - Student film project at New York University: <http://www.nyunews.com/2016/05/02/students-film-for-heforshe/#prettyPhoto>
- The American Association of University Women (AAUW), founded in 1881, is an organization that seeks to advance equity for girls and women through education, advocacy, research, and philanthropy. Encourage students to visit <http://www.aauw.org/what-we-do/campus-programs/> to learn more about the many campus programs AAUW offers. This website offers information on national programs, information on the AAUW Elect Her program, resources to help establish and support student

organizations, and information regarding Campus Action Projects (CAP). Students may be particularly interested in CAP, as the AAUW awards a limited number of grants to assist with these. For more information on these projects, direct students to <http://www.aauw.org/what-we-do/campus-programs/campus-action-projects/>.

### 3. “I, Too, Am \_\_\_\_\_” Photo Campaign

“Every time you saw yourself from the outside, the way other people saw you, you remembered all over again. You saw it in the sign at the Peking Express—a cartoon man with a coolie hat, slant eyes, buckteeth, and chopsticks. You saw it in the little boys on the playground, stretching their eyes to slits with their fingers—*Chinese—Japanese—look at these*—and in the older boys who muttered *ching chong ching chong ching* as they passed you on the street...” (193)

- Recently, a group of black students at Harvard College started a photo campaign titled “I, Too, Am Harvard.” The purpose of the campaign was to highlight the experiences and voices of black students at the university. At the center of the campaign is a series of photos located at <http://itooamharvard.tumblr.com/>. This page features images of over sixty different black students holding signs that detail microaggressions, overt racist remarks, and the responses these students would like to make to them.
- Invite minority students at your school to launch a similar campaign. First, have students visit the “I, Too, Am Harvard” page for inspiration. Then, direct students to similar pages such as “I, Too, Am Oxford” (<http://itooamoxford.tumblr.com/>) and “I, Too, Am McGill” (<http://itooamcgill.tumblr.com/>) to get more ideas.
- Finally, have students access <https://www.tumblr.com/> to create their own page and launch their own “I, Too, Am \_\_\_\_\_” campaign. Encourage them to use social media to invite other minority students on campus to contribute photos and messages.

### 4. Become an Expert and Educator

Have students select a topic related to *Everything I Never Told You* to research in small groups. Some suggested topics include:

- Challenges of being a first-generation American
- Challenges of being a mixed-race individual
- Race, hypervisibility, and colorblindness
- Parenting styles and family dynamics
- The Supreme Court case *Loving v. Virginia* and interracial marriage
- Gender norms in the United States

The purpose of this activity is for students to become experts on their topic so they may effectively educate other members of the campus community. First, student groups should read and analyze applicable sections of *Everything I Never Told You* while performing secondary research as well. After students have sufficiently researched their topic, have them answer the following two questions:

1. What is the essential information that others must know about my group’s topic?
2. What are controversial elements of my topic?

Finally, have students present their research to the campus community in such a way that it both informs and invites them to debate the issue. Groups could:

- Staff an information booth (be sure to obtain permission first) in a visible area and distribute brochures, fliers, or other documents. Free web resources such as <https://www.canva.com/> will work for this, or students could use programs such as Microsoft Publisher to create documents.
- Launch an online campaign through social media or a designed website. Encourage students to create captivating presentations through <http://www.prezi.com> or Google Slides (<http://www.google.com/slides/about/>).
- Design and publish infographics. An infographic is a visual representation of information that features short sections of text and multiple charts, graphs, and other visuals. The digital medium offers students a unique way to package and represent knowledge while sharpening their digital literacy skills. Free resources for this include <http://piktochart.com> and <http://easel.ly>.

Regardless of the format students select, their presentations should invite their audience to ask questions and engage in debate.

### 5. Blog as an Outsider

“Sometimes you didn’t think about it at all. And then sometimes you noticed the girl across the aisle watching, the pharmacist watching, the checkout boy watching, and you saw yourself reflected in their stares: incongruous. Catching the eye like a hook. Every time you saw yourself from the outside, the way other people saw you, you remembered all over again.” (193)

Many of the characters in *Everything I Never Told You* function as outsiders at various points in the narrative. Have students consider times in their own lives when they felt different, alienated, or otherwise intensely aware of their incongruity with the external environment. Such experiences could be attributed to differences related to culture, social class, race, gender, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, or other aspects of identity.

Ask students to search their memories and identify several such experiences. Then, have them blog about these experiences and share their thoughts and feelings related to being an outsider. Have students create one blog post for each experience. In each entry, ask students to discuss:

- What happened during the experience
- The setting of the experience
- Their feelings at the time

- The source(s) of these feelings (gender differences, racial differences, etc.)
- How others reacted to them
- What they learned from their outsider experience

Encourage students to share their blog web addresses via social media, and ask them to read and comment on each other's blog posts.

Free blogging resources for this activity include <http://www.blogger.com> and <http://wordpress.com>.

## VI. OTHER RESOURCES FOR STUDENTS, TEACHERS, AND PROGRAMS

The following are resources useful for extending a study of *Everything I Never Told You* and its related subjects:

- <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/07/why-women-still-cant-have-it-all/309020/>  
An article discussing how women face the challenge of balancing professional and family obligations.
- <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/women/report/2013/09/25/74836/the-state-of-women-in-america/>  
A 50-state analysis of how women are faring in the United States.
- [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/05/opinion/a-conversation-with-asians-on-race.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/05/opinion/a-conversation-with-asians-on-race.html?_r=0)  
An Op-Doc from the *New York Times* featuring Asian Americans discussing race.
- <http://www.cnn.com/2014/07/11/opinion/liu-chinese-american/>  
An opinion piece discussing the significance of omitting the hyphen in "Chinese American."
- <http://kimkiyun.com/#/fine-art/microaggressions/>  
Kiyun Kim's photo series on microaggressions.
- <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/22/us/as-diversity-increases-slights-get-subtler-but-still-sting.html>  
An article from the *New York Times* discussing microaggressions.
- <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/06/12/interracial-marriage-who-is-marrying-out/>  
Information from the Pew Research Center about interracial marriage in the United States.
- <http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2014/06/28/325927002/everything-i-never-told-you-exposed-in-biracial-familys-loss>  
An NPR interview with Celeste Ng.
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PMKjycJ3Ims>  
Penguin Press's book trailer for *Everything I Never Told You*.
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AQUttMxMjqo>  
Celeste Ng reads from and discusses *Everything I Never Told You*.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS GUIDE

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Penguin Teacher's Guide to *Cyrano de Bergerac* and several Penguin Random House First Year and Common Reading Resource Guides. He is a 2013 and 2015 recipient of NCTE's Paul and Kate Farmer Writing Award.



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