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DERRIDA'S OTOBIOGRAPHIES

MELIZ ERGIN

... what interests me today is not strictly called either literature or philosophy. . . . "Autobiography" is perhaps the least inadequate name, because it remains for me the most enigmatic, the most open, even today.

—Jacques Derrida, "This Strange Institution Called Literature" (34)

When asked to classify his writings under the domain of a single genre, Derrida refers us to the loosely defined notion of autobiography. This essay examines the autobiographical thread in Derrida's work to elaborate on the twin problem of identity and writing. The purpose of the essay is threefold. In the first part, I focus on Derrida's critique of the metaphysics of presence in traditional autobiography to develop an understanding of his notion of "otobiography." Derrida exposes the originary breach in the interiority of the autobiographer and demonstrates that the entanglement of self and alterity disrupts the desire for self-presence in autobiography. In the second part, I discuss the intersection between philosophy and autobiography to elucidate the grafting potential of language, which overflows the boundaries established by generic protocols and turns writing into a practice that locates its source in self-differentiating textual operations. In the third and final part, I focus on a reading of *Monolingualism of the Other; or, the Prosthesis of Origin*, which is at once an autobiographical and philosophical work, to show how Derrida's theories of selfhood, language, and writing work themselves out in practice.

Derrida's work on autobiography raises a number of questions that are central to current conversations in the field of life writing studies. As Leigh Gilmore notes in her introduction to *Autobiography and Postmodernism*,

While on the one hand, most traditional critics of autobiography have sought to argue for autobiography's generic coherence and historical continuity in order to win some space in the tightly contested arena of literary studies, many postmodern explorations, on the other hand, seek to do without or do away with the definitional heft and limits provided by genre theory. (6)

As a non-traditional autobiography, *Monolingualism* leads to a similar inquiry about genre theory. Furthermore, Derrida's work explores the notions of self-autonomy and relational identity, and thus contributes to the existing scholarship on autobiography advanced by scholars like Susanna Egan and Paul John Eakin. Whereas Egan states that autobiography "adjusts self-definition in order to accommodate unexpected or original relations with others" ("Encounters" 597), Eakin approaches relationality through social connectivity in *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*. Eakin studies a number of narratives such as Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller*, whose "transmission of other people's stories, stories that are in turn versions of a shared body of myths and legends, is properly understood as an act of self-definition" (73) and points to "an increasingly large component of 'we'-experience in the 'I'-narratives" (75). While these critics debunk the autonomous self by focusing primarily on relations with others, Derrida places emphasis on interpersonal as well as intrapersonal alterity such as the ironic opening between two interlocutors, textual and extratextual selves, the addresser and the addressee. Finally, *Monolingualism* is concerned with testimony and the tension between truth and fiction, two issues that are crucial to ongoing debates in the field of life writing studies as evident in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's essay "Witness or False Witness" and Leigh Gilmore's recent book *Tainted Witness*.

There are currently two seminal texts that study the centrality of autobiography to Derrida's writing: Robert Smith's 1995 *Derrida and Autobiography* and Joseph G. Kronick's 2000 "Philosophy as Autobiography." Smith's work offers a reading of Derrida's philosophy by placing it in a dialogue with other continental philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Søren Kierkegaard, and Paul de Man. He argues that, for Derrida, autobiography is not so much a literary genre as a general condition of writing that disturbs conventional conceptions of life and death. Kronick's article focuses on the relationship between philosophy and autobiography. He studies the problem of reflexivity in the first half of the essay and moves to an analysis of Augustine's *Confessions* and Derrida's "Circumfession" in the second half. While Kronick's and Smith's works offer comprehensive accounts of the place of autobiography in Derrida's work, their focus remains on questions and texts that are different from the ones studied in this essay. Neither Kronick nor Smith analyze *Monolingualism*. This essay contributes to existing scholarship by focusing on a text that has received relatively little attention and by approaching autobiography studies through a philosophical perspective that can radically alter our understanding of identity and writing.

THE OBSTACLE TO AUTO-EXPOSITION

Although the question of autobiography is present in many of Derrida's texts and his entire oeuvre can be read as an analysis of the signature, four works in particular capture our attention with regard to the incursion of the autobiographical subject: *Glas*, "Circumfession," *Monolingualism of the Other*, and *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Among these four texts, *Monolingualism* is perhaps the most personal, as it focuses on the acculturation Derrida underwent as a Jewish boy in Algeria when it was a French colony. It is both a philosophical treatise and a semiautobiographical excursion that questions the limits of our ownership of language and identity. Derrida combines theoretical reflection with historical particularity and foregrounds his own relationship to French language and culture. He offers a phenomenological description of the complexities and ironies of writing and identity we often overlook because of our idealistic tendencies.

In the epilogue to *Monolingualism*, Derrida defines his engagement with this text in terms of what makes the engagement problematic:

What I am sketching here is, above all, not the beginning of some autobiographical or anamnestic outline, nor even a timid essay toward an intellectual bildungsroman. Rather than an exposition of myself, it is an account of what will have placed an obstacle in the way of this auto-exposition for me. An account, therefore, of what will have exposed me to that obstacle and thrown me against it. (70)

Placing emphasis on the *obstacle* to auto-exposition, Derrida echoes the tone of the entire text. He hints at the complications that arise on the way to the dream of an idiomatic writing, suggesting that despite our desire for an absolute self-presence, a strict autobiography is an impossibility.

Derrida's engagement with autobiographical theory can first and foremost be understood as a reaction to the radical autonomy assigned to the subject in the self-reflexive analyses of modern European philosophy. As Rodolphe Gasché writes in *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the History of Reflection*, from the moment that it became a key methodological concept for Cartesian thought, reflection signified a certain principle of philosophical thinking: "By lifting the ego out of its immediate entanglement in the world and by thematizing the subject of thought itself, Descartes establishes the apodictic certainty of self as a result of the clarity and distinctness with which it perceives itself" (13). Self-reflection "makes the human being a subjectivity that has its center in itself, a self-consciousness certain of itself. . . . It constitutes the autonomy of the *cogito*, of the subject, of thought. *Liberum est quod causa sui est*. Only the subject that knows itself, and thus finds the center of all certitude

in itself, is free" (Gasché 14). To that end, in modern philosophy since Descartes, the autonomy of the subject who turns upon itself for absolute reflection has represented an ideal on the way to individual freedom.

The autobiographical tradition has been informed by a similar scope of self-reflexivity and self-certitude as found in the philosophical tradition. Historically, autobiography as self-life-writing has been perceived as a genre that grants the author the right to affirm a unique identity as his property. As Béla Szabados remarks:

traditional autobiography can be seen as depending on a certain picture of self-knowledge, on a certain picture of mind whose dimensions have been elaborated by Descartes and scores of philosophers of mind. This picture has as its features "privileged access" to the contents of our minds, epistemological solitude and final, incorrigible authority over first-person psychological utterances. (2)

Seen from this perspective, autobiography is built on three distinct pillars: a self (an *autos*), a set of chronologically related empirical events and the facts of the subject's life (*bios*), and the inscription of the life story (*graphe*). The autobiographer is concerned with recalling a transparent self that exists prior to the produced text. All outward movement returns to the self-enclosed subjectivity of the author and essence consummates itself through teleological development.

Derrida reveals the fissures inherent to such an understanding of epistemological solitude by foregrounding both the impossibility of disentangling the self from the world and the desire for such an idealistic moment of self-closure. He casts a skeptical eye on the obscure relationship among self, life, and writing, and perceives writing as a playful practice that can radically transform the way we think of selfhood and autonomy. The first point Derrida scrutinizes is the fantasy of the "proper" in self-relation. As he notes in *Points*, "there is naturally a desire, for whoever speaks or writes, to sign in an idiomatic, that is, irreplaceable manner. But as soon as there is a mark, that is, the possibility of a repetition, as soon as there is language, generality has entered the scene and the idiom compromises with something that is not idiomatic: with a common language, concepts, laws, general norms" (200). Disturbing the dream of singularity, Derrida notes that the autobiographical subject is already compromised and loses some of its uniqueness the moment it begins to write. The autobiographical signature thus embodies the tension between singularity and idiosyncrasy on the one hand, and generality and repeatability on the other. The iterability of the signature carries in its very inscription the trace of the absence of its author, whose "future disappearance will not, in principle, hinder [the mark produced by writing] in its functioning" and

from offering itself to be reinterpreted by others (Derrida, "Signature" 8). Autobiography is thus aligned with a kind of *écriture* that simultaneously inherits and disinherits the writing subject. As soon as the writer inscribes "I," it is part of a "we." Hence the taxonomic certainties of the "I" are suspended in "a *récit* where I/we are, where I summon us [*ou je/nous somme*]" (Derrida, "The Law of Genre" 252). The entanglements begin here with the very challenge set against the idea of the single, indivisible subject. Autobiography entails an irresolvable tension between singularity and generality. A recognition of this tension is important in understanding the differencing force of time introduced into the body of the autobiographical text, whose closure is postponed by an implicit delay.

For Derrida, the testamentary structure in autobiography is informed by a division called into play by the iterability of writing, where even the most idiomatic signature is redefined by way of its dependency on the infinite return of an other. Seen in this light, "the autobiographical does not overlap the auto-analytical without limit. Next, it demands a reconsideration of the entire *topos* of the *autos*" (Derrida, *The Post Card* 322). Hence Derrida shifts the focus from *auto* to *oto* (combining forms of *ous*, which means "ear" in Greek) and remarks that "it is the ear of the other that signs. The ear of the other says me to me and constitutes the *autos* of my autobiography" ("Otobiographies" 50–51). The autobiographical signature thus becomes effective not at the moment it takes place but only when the message is received by other ears. The receiving ear may be perceived both as the ear of the other or the ear of the autobiographical subject who "seals—or, in phenomenological terms, affects—itsself in the completion of a circuit between voice and hearing, mouth and ear" (Smith 76). Derrida places critical attention on structural alterity and asserts that "The signature is left to the initiative, to the responsibility, to the discretion of the other. . . . One will sign, if one signs, at the moment of the arrival at destination, not at the origin" (*Negotiations* 346). By shifting his focus from the origin of the signature to its moment of arrival to other ears, Derrida notes that self-coincidence is deferred inexhaustibly, leaving only a trace of the subject writing with a "desire without a horizon" (*Monolingualism* 73). Self-actualization remains an interminable project for the autobiographer left to the discretion of the other in a state of endlessly unfulfilled desire. Where "*Auto*-affection constitutes the same (*auto*) as it divides the same" (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 166), every autobiography is an otobiographical interplay between self and other, mouth and ear.

An understanding of self-actualization as a continuous process calls into question traditional autobiography's focus on the narrative of a finite life. In contrast to the traditional autobiographer, who "aims to transform the course

of life into an eternal present, that is, fix becoming as being or posit life as truth" (Kronick 999), Derrida perceives autobiography as a practice aligned with writing in *différance*, the not-here and not-now. He turns from an ontological toward a "hauntological" (Derrida, *Specters of Marx* 10) understanding of writing as "the name of the structure always already inhabited by the trace" (Spivak xxxix). Simultaneously gazing to both past and future, Derrida locates the autobiographer in a temporal entanglement that suspends the borders between life and death. As Smith notes in *Derrida and Autobiography*, "The attempt at autobiography, the redoubled but doubly failed attempt to seize the name and 'be there' as oneself, entails a deeper involvement with one's own death" (72). An autobiography, then, more nearly resembles an autothanatography.¹ If "life does not go without death, and that death is not beyond, outside of life" (Derrida, *Specters of Marx* 141), then "Every time 'I' begin to write (the life of) my self, death interposes. Every autobiography is an allegory of the writer's death, an autobiothanatography" (Kronick 1014).² As "the death-bearing name . . . released throughout writing" makes it impossible to capture the history of an empirical life in a complete and self-referential narrative, autobiography can no longer reduce "the life term to a coextension of meaning with history" (Smith 73, 191).

Each time "I" writes, the signature of that "I" becomes the bearer of both the survival and the death of the autobiographer, gathering language "not in its identity or its unity . . . but in the uniqueness or singularity of a gathering together of its difference to itself" (*Monolingualism* 68). To capture this force of self-differentiation, Derrida shifts the autobiographical voice from the first person singular to the second person singular: "*ergo es*" ("Circumfession" 314). Descartes's infamous phrase *cogito ergo sum* is slightly bent to accentuate the fact that any form of self-knowledge depends on the infinite return of the other. Derrida's purpose in highlighting structural alterity is to draw our attention to "the space of *relation*" (*Monolingualism* 19) between self and other that is always already there, prior to any ethical decision. He does not speak of hospitality toward the other as a matter of choice, for expressions such as "openness to the other" are "worn enough to give up the ghost" (40). What he demonstrates is that "all forms of identity are auto-immune in that they never completely close in on themselves" (Dooley and Kavanagh 142). Even in a singular event such as confession, "one always confesses the other. . . . There is this division, this divisibility of the confession which structures the confession, so that I never confess myself. . . . If confession is guided by a teleology, it is not confession. It's just an economy, it's a therapy" (Derrida, "Composing 'Circumfession'" 25). Derrida distinguishes between a relative and an absolute hospitality, and adds that "For the truth to be 'made' as an

event, then the truth must fall on me—not be produced by me, but fall on me, or visit me” (23). Critiquing Cartesian solipsism and the autobiographer’s right to affirm a unique identity as his indisputable property, he reminds us that selfhood must be understood by way of its interplay with alterity.

If any understanding of selfhood is understood through this interplay with alterity, then autobiography can be conceptualized as a form of indebtedness. In his posthumously published *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Derrida turns to traditional autobiographies, where “the discourse on the self does not dissociate truth from an avowal . . . from a truth that would be due, a debt, in truth, that needs to be paid off” (21). He asks whether there has ever been an ancient form of autobiography free from the notion of truth as debt before Christianity, its institutions of confession, and before “a reading of the prodigious *Confessions* of European history, which have formed our culture of subjectivity from Augustine to Rousseau” (21–22). At the same time, he argues that if truth is to be perceived as debt, then it is a debt that can never be settled.

Derrida understands autobiography as an ongoing indebtedness, “a secret contract, a credit account which has been both opened and encrypted” (“Otobiographies” 9). The autobiographer “has no relation to himself that is not forced to defer itself by passing through the other in the form, precisely, of the eternal return” (Derrida, “Roundtable on Autobiography” 88). There is thus a necessary detour called into play by the inextricable entanglement with alterity, which can be understood as the heterogeneity both within oneself and among subjects of contradictory positions out in the social world. Like the obstacle to auto-exposition, entanglement entails both a risk and a promise. It is a risk, because one of the conflicting sides may resort to homogenization and seek to assimilate the other. Yet it can also be a promise if the mutual dependence between self and other is seen as a productive and irresolvable tension rather than a moment of deviation exterior to their relation. If identity is rooted in reciprocal relationships, then entanglement can be conceptualized as a mode of engagement, where the self yields neither to “purely ethical behaviour (total openness to the other)” nor to “a complete violent exclusion of the other (total appropriation of alterity)” (Roffe 42). Entanglement can thus be seen as comprising a network of filiations variably loosening and tightening, but never allowing identity to close in on itself.

Entanglements hold an important place in Derrida’s work on identity as well as on writing and genre. His broader concern lies in questioning the desire for essentialist taxonomies, whether it is the taxonomy of the subject or a generic taxonomy of writing that is at stake. Autobiography is an intriguing starting point for such an inquiry because of the ipseity taken for granted in

traditional autobiographies, where, "in whatever manner one invents the story of a construction of the *self*, the *autos*, or the *ipse*, it is always *imagined* that the one who writes should know how to say *I*" (*Monolingualism* 28). Derrida unsettles this self-relation and reveals the playful aspect of autobiography, arguing that "autobiographical anamnesis presupposes *identification*. And precisely not identity. No, an identity is never given, received, or attained; only the interminable and indefinitely phantasmatic process of identification endures" (28). What he calls an obstacle to auto-exposition is this enduring process of identification, which eliminates the possibility of an exhaustively determinable context.

The division of the *autos*, however, "doesn't mean that one has to dissolve the value of the autobiographical *récit*" (Derrida, "Roundtable on Autobiography" 45). Even as the dream of unity remains only a promise, Derrida does not condemn writing as a futile activity. Instead, he elucidates the excessive forces at work in self-reflection and the viability of writing. The excess is called into play by the very experience that "writing destines itself, as if acting on its own, to anamnesia" (*Monolingualism* 8), yet it also enfold its own failure. This simultaneous desire for and failure of anamnesis gives rise to "the feeling of existence as excess, 'being-superfluous', the very beyond of meaning giving rise to writing" (Derrida, "This Strange Institution" 36).³ Derrida also refers to this dynamic as "the autobiographicity that greatly overflows the 'genre' of autobiography" (Derrida and Ferraris 41) and trespasses the different forms of writing. The excess shifts our focus from the written work to the *desire* for writing. It throws light on the inexhaustible remainder in writing, which "demand[s] that a sort of opening, play, indetermination be left, signifying hospitality for what is to come [*l'avenir*]" (31). This excess in writing is what enables a revision of its contents.

The autobiographical desire and failure accentuated by Derrida problematizes traditional autobiographies, where authors organize the past to legitimize the proper names they construct for themselves. Derrida specifically uses the word "mourning" instead of "remembering" to point out that we are never finished with comprehending the past. Although memory fails to recover what has been irretrievably lost, we do not give up the desire to mourn the fractured past. He uses the term *déferlement* in reference to this crucial drift [*dérive*] in memory and its "surging wave" (*Monolingualism* 31). Memory "ebbs and flows like a wave that . . . swells, sweeps along, and enriches itself with everything, carries away, brings back, departs and becomes swollen again with what it has dragged away" (31). Connoting both resurging and deferral, *déferlement* alludes to the double movement of expropriation and reappropriation. The wave analogy draws attention to an ongoing momentum that

foregrounds “the generative movement in the play of differences” (Derrida, *Positions* 27), thus proving to be a useful tool in disputing history’s logocentrism and orders of subordination. It enables us to perceive history—personal as well as collective—as developing in self-generating complexity, not in terms of overcoming or transcending linearity.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND PHILOSOPHY

Derrida’s interest in autobiographical memory should be seen in relation to his critique of the metaphysics of presence in Western philosophy. When Derrida inquires into the limitations imposed on the autobiographical subject and destabilizes the circular understanding of memory and identity, he also dismantles the same limitations bearing upon philosophical writing. As he writes in *A Taste for the Secret*, philosophy “has always been at the service of this autobiographical design of memory” (Derrida and Ferraris 41). The implication of this statement can perhaps be best understood if we turn to Kronick’s observation that “autobiography shares with philosophy the problem of self-accounting. . . . One of the great claims of philosophy is to account for origins, its own and others” (1003). This common concern for self-accounting in philosophy and autobiography is an important issue Derrida rigorously addresses in much of his work.

When Derrida casts a skeptical eye on the distinct boundaries drawn between *autos* (self), *bios* (life), and *graphe* (writing) in traditional autobiography, he is at once calling into question the same boundaries in Western philosophy. As he notes in the interview “The Three Ages of Jacques Derrida,” philosophers from the Western tradition—from Aristotle to Heidegger—“consider their own lives as something marginal or accidental. . . . Biography is something empirical and outside, and is considered an accident that isn’t necessarily or essentially linked to the philosophical activity or system” (McKenna). Derrida, by contrast, points out that lived experience cannot be separated from philosophical activity and the philosopher cannot disentangle himself from his work. Calling attention to the autobiographical aspect of philosophical writing, Derrida questions “the *dynamis* of that borderline between the ‘work’ and the ‘life’, the system and the subject of the system” (“Otobiographies” 5). Just as the distinctions among subject, life, and work cannot easily be made in autobiography, the same boundaries cannot remain intact in the philosophical work. The conventional view that philosophy is the representation of universal truths unaffected by personal or collective history does not find a safe place in his work.

Derrida locates the philosopher, much like the autobiographical subject, in an ongoing state of indebtedness in his quest for an originary truth. The

notion of indebtedness shifts our focus from the ideal of a transcendental truth to the question of testimony. As Kronick argues, "The alliance of philosophy with autobiography is . . . of the fiction that attaches itself to truth . . . which occurs whenever one testifies or swears to truth" (1008). Derrida makes visible this interplay of truth and fiction in self-reflective analyses of both autobiography and philosophy. He reevaluates philosophical writing in light of the obstacle that autobiographical memory encounters on the way to the completion of a circular narrative. As he suggests in *Monolingualism*, this obstacle—which goes by different names such as excess, *déferlement*, *différance*—is what sustains the exposition of truth in philosophical inquiry in a state of detour. The ambiguity introduced into the body of the philosophical text reflects a wider concern with testimony, singularity, and context.

When Derrida analyzes philosophical works, he calls into question the essentialist prerogatives of the institution of philosophy and asserts that these prerogatives emerge out of a given historical context. As Robert J. C. Young observes in *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*, "whereas other philosophers would write of 'philosophy', for you it was always 'western philosophy'. Whiteness, otherness, margins, decentring: it was obvious to me . . . what presuppositions you were seeking to dislodge" (412). Underlining the historical responsibility of Western philosophy, Derrida uses "history against philosophy: when confronted with essentialist, idealizing theories and claims to ahistorical or transhistorical understanding, he asserts the historicity of these discourses and theoretical assumptions" (Culler 129). At the same time, he rejects an uncritical examination of history and turns to a philosophical critique of personal and collective history. Hence his approach to autobiography both engages a philosophical inquiry and is historically grounded. He unsettles the hierarchy between essence and supplement, and he rewrites history while recognizing that the very model of history is a product of the history that he wants to rewrite (Young 412). Derrida's purpose is not to reduce autobiography and philosophy to one and the same, but to tease their boundaries. He seeks to find "a place from which the history of this frontier could be thought or even displaced—in writing itself and not only by historical or theoretical reflection" (Derrida, "This Strange Institution" 34). Derrida calls into question our commitment to generic and disciplinary boundaries, and draws attention to the complex dynamics at work in writing in general.

One strategy Derrida uses to reveal these dynamics is to elaborate on the dual tendencies at work in the act of writing: "the self-reflexive strata of texts on the one hand, and on the other the textual operations in the background that both permit such reflection and prevent it from finally coinciding with itself" (Gasché 290). The text's claim to a circumscribed discourse or mode of self-representation is overrun by the entire system of the text's own resources

and displacements. Hence, no self-representation can coincide with itself to constitute itself as presence. This double and contradictory movement in writing reveals the tension between textual intentionality and the final fulfillment of the text's intended effect. It shows that a text may present itself within a decipherable generic context and yet be prone to "the disruption, in the last analysis, of the authority of the code as a finite system of rules; at the same time, the radical destruction of any context as the protocol of code" (Derrida, "Signature" 8). It is as an effect of the excess called into play by this disruption that entanglement comes into the picture to underline what is built into the entire enterprise of writing in a genre or thinking about generic taxonomy.

When elaborating on the double movement conditioned by writing, Derrida utilizes the concept of the "general text" (*le texte général*), which exceeds the traditional determination of text as totality. As Gasché notes, if text always implies an empirical closure of the unity of a corpus and the totality of its formal and thematic meanings, general text, "characterized by structures of referral without a referent" (281), is where this unity collapses. With a pre-ontological status, it functions as "a fabric of traces, a system of linking of traces, in other words a network of textual referrals (*renvois textuels*). Because of this . . . tissue of traces endlessly referring to something other than itself, yet never to an extratext that would bring its referring function to a clear stop, the general text is by nature heterogeneous" (Gasché 289). Carrying within itself the law of its displacement and heterogeneity, the general text allows for a rupture of its context and lends itself to future recontextualizations. Derrida refers to this force of recontextualization as the grafting potential of language, which overflows the boundaries established by generic protocols and turns writing into a practice "which is more potent than its so-called agents or institutors" (Smith 136). It is this force that reinscribes the discourses of autobiography or philosophy into their margins, "unsettles their pretensions to authority and autonomy, and 'grounds' them in what they do not control" (Gasché 260). If writing can no longer locate its source in a self-identical discourse but rather in self-differentiating textual operations, then it cannot be essential. It is bound—like identity—to be impure. In the absence of a transcendent center of origin, where further signification and transformation of a structure's contents are always possible, writing—including autobiography and philosophical *écriture*—finds the source of its creative potential in this impurity.

Monolingualism of the Other sets a good example for textual heterogeneity and impurity as it complicates the identifiable boundaries of philosophy and autobiography. Derrida sees the philosophical system rooted in the biography of the author and challenges the presumption that "from the moment one speaks of signature or of autobiopheme, one is no longer in the

philosophical field" (*Points* 135). In contrast to most thinkers from the Western metaphysical tradition, he does not impose "an invisible or *indivisible* trait lying between the enclosure of philosophemes, on the one hand, and the life of an author already identifiable behind the name, on the other" (Derrida, "Otobiographies" 5). The signature becomes a compelling issue in *Monolingualism*, where theoretical reflections on linguistic and cultural identity cannot be disentangled from Derrida's own linguistic acculturation in Algeria. As he puts it, "In a minimal autobiographical trait can be gathered the greatest potentiality of historical, theoretical, linguistic, philosophical culture" ("This Strange Institution" 43), and it is this culture that is recollected in *Monolingualism*.

NOSTALGERIA: DERRIDA, THE EXEMPLARY FRANCO-MAGHREBIAN

Monolingualism was initially composed as a conference paper to be presented at a colloquium hosted by Édouard Glissant in 1992 at Louisiana State University. The conference titled "Echoes from Elsewhere"/"*Renvois d'ailleurs*" addressed *francophonie* outside France within the comparative framework of language, politics, and culture. It is no wonder that one of Derrida's most explicitly autobiographical texts was composed in response to colleagues' inquiries at this conference, since he often produced writing as countersignatures, in a "sort of animal moment" that "seeks to appropriate what always comes, always, from an *external* provocation" (Derrida, *Points* 352). The starting point of this conference was a dialogue initiated between Derrida and his friends, including Abdelkebir Khatibi, the Moroccan writer and literary critic. Thus what we encounter in *Monolingualism* is not an autobiographer who tells the story of his life to himself. In question is a dialogic autobiography in which the author begins and ends the *récit* in a colloquial mode. Derrida structures this work as an anti-autobiographical autobiography, which resembles a "counter-institutional institution [that] can be both subversive and conservative" ("This Strange Institution" 58). *Monolingualism* mimics the autobiographical genre to critique its self-centered structure and replaces the author's autonomy with two asymmetrical voices that testify to the division of the same. The responsibility to inscribe oneself in relation to the other brings to the surface the entanglement at work in the signatorial event.

Monolingualism performs on at least three levels. First, Derrida scrutinizes the fantasy of the proper in self-relation by sustaining a dialogue between two interlocutors who hold on to an "'internal' polylogue" ("This Strange Institution" 36). Second, *Monolingualism* gives an account of the linguistic and political acculturation Derrida underwent as a young Algerian Jew in Algiers in the 1940s to show how his philosophical views are so influenced by his

biography. Yet, at the same time, he engages with life narrative in an ironic manner and casts a skeptical eye on one's attachment to linguistic and cultural identity. Finally, *Monolingualism* trespasses generic boundaries: "Already we'd have trouble not spotting but separating out historical narrative, literary fiction, and philosophical reflexion" (35).

In the initial pages of *Monolingualism*, we encounter the quasi-dramatic enactment of a dialogue between two interlocutors who systematically disrupt each other's program, as if they emerge from "some powerful utterance-producing machine that programs the movements of the two opposing forces at once" (Derrida, "Otobiographies" 29). Reenacting the otobiographical interplay between self and other, one voice articulates a message and the ear of the other receives the message and responds to it. The contradiction of the double in *Monolingualism* conditions the absence of the transcendental signified as limitlessness of play. In this "double-tongued text" (Bennington 153), Derrida contests the traditional philosophical opposition whereby we deal not "with the peaceful coexistence of a *vis-à-vis*, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand" (Derrida, *Positions* 41). He unsettles this violent hierarchy by laying out aporias and claiming that there is no responsibility without the destabilizing experience of aporia.

The dialogue resembles, in part, the Socratic dialogue. In *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin writes that in the Socratic dialogue, "The dialogic means of seeking truth is counterposed to official monologism" (110). The two basic devices used in the Socratic dialogue are "syncrisis," or the "juxtaposition of various views," and "anacrisis," the "means for eliciting and provoking the words of one's interlocutor, forcing him to express his opinion and express it thoroughly" (Bakhtin 110). The reader can trace something akin to these two devices in *Monolingualism*, where the interlocutors contest each other's statements, interrupting the moment of self-closure. While one interlocutor makes a seemingly paradoxical statement based on personal experience and dwells in the experience of the undecidable, the other accuses him of committing a logical contradiction:

"Yes, I only have one language, yet it is not mine."

—You speak the impossible. Your speech does not hold water. . . . You are putting forward a sort of solemn attestation that stupidly drags itself by the heels into a logical contradiction. . . . It is as if, in one and the same breath, you were lying by confessing the lie. . . .

—Is that so? But then why would they not stop? . . . Even you cannot seem to manage to convince yourself, and you multiply your objection, always making the same one, and exhausting yourself in redundancy. (*Monolingualism* 2–3)

Derrida preserves this dialogic state until the very end of the book. The voices continue to interrupt one another without reaching a resolution. While one interlocutor dwells on this subject of alienation and states that he possesses only one language that is not his, the other finds the statement to be a “logical absurdity,” a “performative contradiction” (3). Hence the former defends his case by making a demonstration, where the only evidence of his propositions’ credibility is his testimony. In the dialogue between the interlocutors, the closest one comes to truth is through attestation. The question of credibility draws attention to the undecidable boundary between factual/fictional, logical/believable, leading to the conclusion that “truth remains bound to its spectral relationship with the lie. The co-implication of truth and falsity does not mean that truth receives its identity from its opposite, but that truth, like testimony, is a performative act” (Kronick 1002). By setting up a dialogue where autobiographical anamnesis and philosophical argumentation merge, Derrida draws attention to the performative and testimonial dimension that philosophy shares in common with autobiography. He foregrounds the interlocutors’ promise to *make* truth rather than to *make known* what is true.

Derrida’s emphasis on testimony leads to difficult reflections on bearing witness. The interlocutors dwell in a space of relation, where “the shuttle of negotiation is precisely between affirmation and position” (Derrida, *Negotiations* 26). As one interlocutor casts a skeptical eye on the other’s decisions arising “against a background of the undecideable” (*Monolingualism* 62) and excludes him from the institution of philosophy, the other responds in the following manner:

Stop. Do not play that trick on us again, please. . . . Certain German or Anglo-American theorists believe they have discovered an unanswerable strategy there. . . . Its mechanism amounts roughly to this: “Ah! So you ask yourself questions about truth. . . . Come on! you are a skeptic, a relativist, a nihilist; you are not a serious philosopher! If you continue, you will be placed in a department of rhetoric or literature.” (*Monolingualism* 4)

Derrida’s purpose in parodying the suggested theorists is to show that his interest does not lie in dismantling the notion of truth and embracing relativism. On the contrary, he consistently insists upon our obligation to truthfulness. What he illustrates is that “deconstruction (we should once again remind those who do not want to read) is neither negative nor nihilistic” (Derrida, “Eating Well” 108–09). It is not a technical operation intended to destroy systems but “a consequence of the fact that the system is impossible; it often consists, regularly or recurrently, in making appear—in each alleged system. . . —a force of dislocation, a limit in the totalization” (Derrida and

Ferraris 4). Derrida exposes the reader to this limit, by exposing the undecidability in the autobiographical-philosophical text and by reminding the reader that where we think of testimony, we need to join the thinking of truth and fiction. As he notes, “every constative is rooted in the presupposition of an at least implicit performative. . . . I can always lie and bear false witness, right there where I say to you . . . ‘I tell you the truth’” (“Typewriter Ribbon” 111). Hence when one testifies, “one can *testify* only to the unbelievable. To what can, at any rate, only be believed . . . beyond the limits of proof” (*Monolingualism* 20). By exposing the limit in the totalization, the un/believable points beyond the limits of presence into the future.

In addition to elaborating on testimony and accountability, Derrida relies heavily on irony to show the force of dislocation in the philosophical system. Just as he imitates autobiography to maneuver the genre differently, he uses philosophical language to propose what the “circular law with which philosophy is familiar” (*Monolingualism* 11) cannot untangle. His auto-exposition neither subordinates the irreducibility of his singular account to the general, nor escapes the generalizing force of philosophical argumentation entirely. Rather he oscillates between singularity and generality, positioning himself as both unique and exemplary. On the one hand, he identifies himself as the host who desires to offer an idiomatic account; on the other hand, his account is breached by generality at the moment it falls into language and is heard by other ears, turning him into a hostage. “Thus interbreeding and accumulating the two logics, that of exemplarity and that of the host as hostage” (20), Derrida makes the following ironic statement: “we will affirm then that the one who is *most*, most purely, or most rigorously, most essentially, Franco-Maghrebian would allow us to decipher *what it is to be* Franco-Maghrebian *in general*” (11). Despite the desire for an idiomatic mark, singularity and generality remain tangled in an irresolvable tension. This irresolvable tension is of utmost importance, for it enables Derrida to archive diverse voices and interpretive possibilities. His concern with testimony, as Dooley and Kavanagh note, is always about “an ethics and a politics of memory . . . essentially the desire to do justice to the *other*” (107). Such an ethics of memory requires the autobiographer to remain critical of closed identitarianism. Thus while questioning the meaning of being Franco-Maghrebian, Derrida focuses on the fissures and paradoxes of identity rather than construing a self-same identity through the memories he recollects.

The statement “*I only have one language, yet it is not mine*” becomes the focal point of *Monolingualism*. Derrida dwells on his relationship to the French language within the context of the French colonization of Algeria. Despite the fact that French is his mother tongue, he recalls feeling that this language

was not his own, as if it were a stepmother tongue he felt distanced from. This dislocation arose because “the manner in which the French language was taught, the norms of ‘proper’ speaking and writing, the references to literature, all made it pretty clear that the model was in France—and not just in France, but in Paris” (Derrida and Ferraris 38). In the opening pages of *Monolingualism*, Derrida classifies the French speakers he met at the colloquium in Louisiana into three categories: Francophone French speakers who are not Maghrebians (from France), Francophones who are neither French nor Maghrebians (for example, the Swiss), and French-speaking Maghrebians who have never been French citizens (for example, Moroccans). As he does not fall under any one of these categories, Derrida makes the following ironic remark to his friend Abdelkebir Khatibi: “You see, dear Abdelkebir, between the two of us, I consider myself to be the *most* Franco-Maghrebian, and perhaps even the *only* Franco-Maghrebian here” (*Monolingualism* 12). Contrasting himself to Khatibi, who was born into a household where Arabic was the primary language, Derrida notes that growing up speaking French in colonized Algeria complicates his understanding of the mother tongue.

Born in El-Biar, near Algiers, in 1930, Derrida came from a family that had first migrated to Algeria as part of the French-speaking Sephardic Jewish community from Spain (Bennington and Derrida 325) to which the Crémieux Decree had granted French citizenship in 1870. After being French citizens for over half a century, the same community was deprived of their citizenship between 1941 and 1943, in the midst of the Nazi occupation of France, without “*gaining back any other citizenship. No other*” (*Monolingualism* 15). This loss of citizenship marks Derrida’s first exilic experience. As he writes, “citizenship does not define a cultural, linguistic, or, in general, historical participation. It does not cover all these modes of belonging” (14–15). Yet he also emphasizes that “it is not some superficial or superstructural predicate floating on the surface of experience” (15). Thus the reference to citizenship at the beginning of *Monolingualism* alludes to both the fantasy of a motherland and the sense of exile Derrida experienced on linguistic and cultural levels.

The loss of French citizenship by the French-speaking Jews of Algeria implied that

being already strangers to the roots of French culture, even if that was their only acquired culture, their only educational instruction, and, especially, their only language, being strangers, still more radically, for the most part, to Arab or Berber cultures, the greater majority of these young “indigenous Jews” remained, in addition, strangers to Jewish culture. (*Monolingualism* 53)

The first “wound,” as far as Derrida recalls, was inflicted on him when he was expelled from school and sent home in 1942 for being Jewish. As he puts it, “through that wound there was ensconced in me a certain conscious-unconscious way of looking at intellectual matters—at culture and the language problem” (Derrida and Ferraris 37). Derrida was Jewish but did not speak Hebrew or Yiddish; he grew up in Algeria but did not speak Arabic or Berber. He was estranged from his religious community due to the anti-Semitism in the pro-Nazi regime, yet neither did he belong to the group of “Algerians proper, in the sense of coming from the indigenous Arab, Berber, Kabyle, Chaouia, or Mzabite peoples” (Young 414). Moreover, he participated in an education system that repeatedly asserted that his motherland was France and his mother tongue French, despite the fact that he “had still never gone ‘to France’” (*Monolingualism* 16). Whereas French and Latin were obligatory in schools, Arabic was offered as an optional course along with English and German. Berber was not even mentioned. As a result of growing up amid all these languages and “interdicts” in the educational system (37), Derrida did not develop a sense of belonging that could be entirely monolingual or monocultural. His estrangement from French language left a “phantomical map ‘inside’ the said monolanguage” as if “translation translates itself in an internal (Franco-French) translation by playing with the non-identity with itself of all language” (65). If language is one of the main determinants of national identity, then the first complication in Derrida’s life began with this uncertain relationship between language and motherland.

Derrida’s motive for giving such weight to language in *Monolingualism* is both to demonstrate the tangle of language and identity, and to stress the fact that where even one’s primary or mother tongue does not provide a sense of “being at home,” defining oneself through linguistic and cultural appropriation becomes problematic.

For never was I able to call French, this language I am speaking to you, “my mother tongue.”

... I leave to others the words “my mother tongue.”

... My culture was right away a political culture. “My mother tongue” is what they say, what they speak; as for me, I cite and question them. ... Especially when, so lightly, they celebrate “fraternity.” At bottom, brothers, the mother tongue, and so forth pose the same problem. (*Monolingualism* 34)

In reaction to such claims of ownership, Derrida places emphasis on the structural limits of our possession of an originary linguistic and cultural identity. The only language he speaks also alienated him, which implies that “this abiding ‘alienation’ [*aliénation à demeure*] appears, like ‘lack,’ to be constitutive

... it lacks nothing that precedes or follows it, it alienates no *ipseity*, no property, and no self that has ever been able to represent its watchful eye" (*Monolingualism* 25). As Derrida notes, "From all viewpoints, which are not just grammatical, logical, or philosophical, it is well known that the I of the kind of anamnesis called autobiographical, the I [*je-me*] of I recall [*je me rappelle*] is produced and uttered in different ways depending on the language in question" (29). If there is no metalanguage, but only the "relays of metalanguage 'within' a language," then the I never precedes the pre-egological ipseity of language and "is not independent of language in general" (22, 29).

That the textual "I" does not exist prior to the autobiographical inscription is a point that many contemporary scholars of autobiography from Eakin to G. Thomas Couser have also elaborated. As Couser notes in *Memoir: An Introduction*, "life narrative does not just *issue* from preexisting and integrated selves; rather, it helps to develop and define them" (25). As Eakin also observes, "narrative is not merely a literary form but a mode of phenomenological and cognitive self-experience, while self—the self as autobiographical discourse—does not necessarily precede its constitution in narrative" (*How* 100). While these scholars emphasize the role of narrative as a means by which the autobiographical self is constituted, Derrida focuses particularly on the role of the *language* in which narrative is structured. The "exemplary" Franco-Maghrebian he portrays in *Monolingualism* cannot be thought of as existing independently from French language and the cultural-political history attached to it.

To further accentuate the interdependency of language and identity, Derrida calls attention to the "Frenchifying" effect of French language that left an almost physical imprint on him. As he notes, a literary capital of France in exile was constituted in Algiers in 1942, which brought him ever closer to French literature and philosophy that "harpooned" him like

wooden or metallic darts [*flèches*], a penetrating body of enviable, formidable, and inaccessible words even when they were entering me, sentences which it was necessary to appropriate, domesticate, coax [*amadouer*], that is to say, love by setting on fire . . . perhaps destroy, in all events mark, transform, prune, cut, forge, graft at the fire. (*Monolingualism* 50–51)

The physical appropriation of language turns his body into a palimpsest on which the French culture is inscribed: "when we mention the body, we are naming the body of language and writing, as well as what makes them a thing of the body" (*Monolingualism* 27). His linguistic acculturation renders visible two different dynamics at work. First, it reveals a colonial acculturation, manifesting the scars written over the body of the colonial subject—"the experience of the injury, the offense, vengeance, and the lesion," and

“the traumatizing brutality of what is called modern colonial war” (26, 39). Second, it raises questions about the colonial aspect of all culture and forms of acculturation. As Derrida remarks, “All culture is originarily colonial. . . . Every culture institutes itself through the unilateral imposition of some ‘politics’ of language” (39). This statement may appear controversial, for Derrida addresses, at once, the historical specificity of the French colonization of Algeria, and the more abstract relationship between linguistic acculturation and colonialism. Furthermore, Derrida’s statement may invite objections, for, if his line of reasoning were to be followed, Indigenous cultures can only be said to be “colonial” in the most abstract sense. Yet resisting accusations that he may be “confusing it all” (40), Derrida accentuates the “politics of language” which is not only at work in colonized countries like Algeria. He argues that the “monolingualism imposed by the other operates . . . through a sovereignty whose essence is always colonial, which tends, repressively and irrepressibly, to reduce language to the One, that is, to the hegemony of the homogeneous” (39–40). Derrida gives the hegemony of French in France as an example:

We know how that went with French in France itself, in revolutionary France as much as, or more than, in monarchical France. This sovereign establishment . . . may be open, legal, armed, or cunning, disguised under alibis of “universal” humanism, and sometimes of the most generous hospitality. It always follows or precedes culture like its shadow. (*Monolingualism* 39)

For Derrida, who admits to having “experienced colonial cruelty from two sides” (*Monolingualism* 39), the monolingualism of the other then has a second meaning: “in any case we speak only one language—and that we do not *own* it . . . since it returns to the other, it exists asymmetrically, always for *the other*, from the other, kept by the other” (40). Although French was supposed to be his maternal tongue, its “source, norms, rules, and law were situated elsewhere. . . . In the Capital-City-Mother-Fatherland,” in a “place of fantasy, therefore, at an ungraspable distance” (41, 42). Given the “destinerrancy” (Derrida, “Circumfession” 314) he experiences via language, whose origin is always already established “elsewhere,” Derrida leaves us with the following questions: “In what language does one write memoirs when there has been no authorized mother tongue? How does one utter a worthwhile ‘I recall’ when it is necessary to invent both one’s language and one’s ‘I,’ to invent them *at the same time*, beyond this surging wave of amnesia . . . ?” (*Monolingualism* 31).

Derrida asserts that singular memories he remembers cannot possibly recover an originary Franco-Maghrebian identity. This is not only because any origin is always already located elsewhere, but also because, as James Olney remarks in *Memory and Narrative: The Weave of Life-Writing*, “Memory spreads

out the text of our lives for us to read again and again, but I would recall and reemphasize the etymological origin of *text* in *texere*, 'to weave', for the text is never fixed or single: it is ever rewoven, constantly renewed or reconstructed" (344). Like *bios*, the "text of memory" and the "text of narrative" are thus amenable to constant revision (419). For this reason, Derrida admits that "Anamnesis would be risky . . . I'd like to escape my own stereotypes" ("This Strange Institution" 34). What he achieves by the end of his autobiographical-philosophical exercise is but "a vague *resemblance* to myself" (*Monolingualism* 19). Autobiographical *récit* is not so much about the recollection of the essence of the writing subject as it is about the "secrets of unreadability" (73), which is why at the end of another autobiographical exercise Derrida confesses that it is "too late, you are less, you, less than yourself" ("Circumfession" 314).

Monolingualism reveals the double attempt and failure to capture a sealed interiority, and leads to some compelling questions about purity of identity and writing. On the level of self-accounting, any assertion of self that emerges gets dispersed and redistributed from out of the enclosed past into the open future. What begins as an autobiographical-philosophical account ends with an emphasis on the complex relationship between politics of language and difficulties of identification instead of a distinct articulation of the author's subjectivity. On a generic level, the text operates as a monstrous hybrid, at once autobiographical and philosophical. What Derrida writes of *Glas* holds true for *Monolingualism* as well: the text

circulates between these two genres, trying meanwhile to produce another text which would be of another genre or without genre. . . . if one insists on defining genres at all costs, one could refer historically to Menippean satire, to "anatomy" (as in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*), or to something like philosophic parody where all genres—poetry, philosophy, theater, et cetera—are summoned up at once. ("Roundtable on Translation" 140–41)

Just as Derrida participates in Sephardic-Judeo-Algerian-French cultures without ever fully belonging to any of them, his writing participates in a number of genres while recognizing that "such a participation never amounts to belonging" (Derrida, "Law of Genre" 230). Rather than assembling his work under the rubric of a singular genre, Derrida focuses on the generative potential of writing that gives rise to "a graft of several genres" (Derrida, "Roundtable on Translation" 141). Perhaps one could even argue that Derrida sees language, more than himself, as the agent here. Through its "transformations, expropriation . . . a-nomie and de-regulation" (*Monolingualism* 65), language challenges the economy of non-contamination. It is as if not to let

language overwhelm generic boundaries would be violence toward the “incomprehensible guest” (51) that language awaits.

Derrida shifts his focus from the notion of an originary identity to the process of identification, from the accountability of the written product to the process of writing. His critique of essentialist taxonomies, through a depiction of obstacles and entanglements, radically transforms the way we conceptualize presence. *Monolingualism* accommodates the productive interplay of subjectivities and genres, regenerating them toward a future without an “eschatological content” (*Monolingualism* 68). He thus adds with irony, “I therefore venture to present myself to you here, ecce homo, in parody, as the exemplary Franco-Maghrebian, but disarmed, with accents that are more naïve, less controlled, and less polished” (19).⁴ Derrida’s testimony is less controlled, because he is at once making a confession and does not know where the confession will lead him. His autobiographical excursion is a “scene without a theatre,” a scene whose eventfulness is determined by “the extent to which that scene betrays” him (72, 73). Constantly thrown against the obstacle to auto-exposition, as if in “a serious traffic accident about which I never cease thinking” (70),⁵ he construes a narrative about the self, whose secret “no other person could really appropriate. Not even I, who would, however, be in on the secret. I must still dream about it, in my ‘nostalgeria’” (52). His nostalgeria ultimately takes him to a state of being at home in exile. If there is no “*testimonial deus ex machina*” (Derrida, *Acts of Religion* 66), which can give access to a “possible habitat without the difference of this exile and this nostalgia” (*Monolingualism* 58), then where does the autobiographer turn in order to recuperate his origins? As Derrida asks, “Where do we find ourselves? With whom can we still *identify* in order to affirm our own identity and to tell ourselves our own history?” (55).

At the end of his account, Derrida admits: “A Judeo-Franco-Maghrebian genealogy does not clarify everything, far from it. But could I explain anything without it, ever?” (*Monolingualism* 71–72). His autobiographical practice takes him toward a destination where he “never knows in the present, with present knowledge” (Derrida, “Otobiographies” 9). Ultimately, his genealogical impulse does not lead to the recuperation of an originary identity but to prosthesis of origin. Despite the fact that memory fails to recover what is lost, he does not give up the desire to mourn the fractured past. Derrida refers to “transvoided” memory as “a strangely bottomless alienation of the soul: a catastrophe . . . [and] a paradoxical opportunity” (*Monolingualism* 53). Like the obstacle to auto-exposition, transvoided memory is both an opportunity and a catastrophe, because without a risk of failure of memory, there can be no history.

NOTES

1. The notion of autothanatography has also been widely discussed by Nancy K. Miller and Susanna Egan. Whereas Miller remarks that every autobiography can also be considered an autothanatography, for we live with an awareness of imminent death and prospective nonexistence (12), Egan utilizes the term in exploring narratives that focus on the process of dying, paying particular attention to narratives of terminal illness in *Mirror Talk*.
2. All emphasis in subsequent quotations appear in the original sources.
3. The double movement of desire and failure can be understood in relation to Derrida's discussion of the Freudian game *fort/da* in *The Post Card*. The game involves a child playing with a spool, repeating an operation that consists in distancing the object in order to observe that he brings it back. What matters is not the object of desire, but the desire itself, which propels a movement between *need* and *distance*, appropriation and expropriation. According to Derrida, "every autobiography is the departure/return of a *fort/da*" as "autobiography of the writing posits and deposits simultaneously, in the same movement, the psychoanalytic movement" (*The Post Card* 322, 303).
4. The reference to Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is* (1908) provides the context for this book with regard to its subversion of the conventions of the autobiographical genre and the play with multiple signatures.
5. In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche uses a similar analogy to critique the economy of self-presence in the autobiographical act, writing, "I am always equal to accidents: I have to be unprepared to be the master of myself" (227).

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