



article

reconsidering school in painful times: an ending-beginning conversation

authors

walter omar kohan

rio de janeiro state university

email: wokohan@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2263-9732>

david knowles kennedy

montclair state university

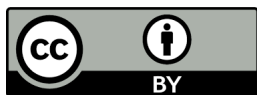
email: dkeleutheros@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8969-5395>

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abstract

This article consists of an epistolary conversation between two experienced scholars in the field of philosophy of childhood around different dimensions of schooling. Starting from a shared diagnosis of the actual state of the world where greed, mendacity, corruption, cynicism, and cruelty and violence in politics and public speech prevail, a common search for a (new) beginning of another world—a *novum*—is carried out. The concept of childhood plays a core role in this conversation, one inspired by the utopian thinking of various prophetic intellectuals: Deleuze and Guattari and “becoming child”; Spinoza’s “joy”; Marcuse’s “new sensibility”; the Romantic “renovation of perception” or William Blake’s “cleansing” of the “doors of perception”; Paulo Freire’s relationship to the concept of “beginning,” and Nego Bispo’s circle of “beginning-middle-beginning.” The content and form of a general letter of intent to those adults participating in the formation of a hypothetical utopian school is discussed, imagining the relationship of such a school to lived space and time, body, animals, plants love, friendship, equality, hope, errantry, joy, questioning, listening, creating and



dreaming. In that same context Jane Elliot's well-known blue-eyes/brown eyes anti-racist experiment in the sixties is presented in order to problematize the power of school as an adult-child intentional community that might self-organize to function as a potential ground of personal and social transformation, both for students and teachers. The conversation ends, paradoxically, with the affirmation of beginning as a childlike force in schooling.

keywords: school, beginning; childhood; racism; Jane Elliot.

reconsiderando la escuela en tiempos dolorosos: una conversación final-inicial

resumen

Este artículo consiste en una conversación epistolar entre dos académicos con amplia experiencia en filosofía de la infancia en torno a diferentes dimensiones de la escuela. Partiendo de un diagnóstico compartido del estado actual del mundo, donde prevalecen la codicia, la mendacidad, la corrupción, el cinismo, la crueldad y la violencia en la política y el discurso público, se lleva a cabo una búsqueda común de un (nuevo) comienzo de otro mundo: un *novum*. El concepto de infancia desempeña un papel central en esta conversación, inspirado en el pensamiento utópico de diversos intelectuales proféticos: Deleuze y Guattari y el "devenir niño"; la "alegría" de Spinoza; la "nueva sensibilidad" de Marcuse; la "renovación de la percepción" romántica o la "limpieza" de las "puertas de la percepción" de William Blake; la relación de Paulo Freire con el concepto de "comienzo" y el círculo de "comienzo-medio-comienzo" de Nego Bispo. Se discute el contenido y la forma de una carta de general dirigida a personas adultas que participan en la formación de una hipotética escuela utópica, imaginando la relación de dicha escuela con el espacio y el tiempo vividos, el cuerpo, los animales, las

plantas, el amor, la amistad, la igualdad, la esperanza, la errancia, la alegría, el cuestionamiento, la escucha, la creación y la ensoñación. En ese mismo contexto, se presenta el conocido experimento antirracista de Jane Elliot, «ojos azules/ojos marrones», de los años sesenta, para problematizar el poder de la escuela como comunidad intencional entre adultos y niñas/os que podría autoorganizarse para funcionar como un potencial terreno de transformación personal y social, tanto para estudiantes como para docentes. La conversación concluye, paradójicamente, con la afirmación del comienzo como una fuerza propia de la infancia en la escuela.

palabras clave: escuela; comienzo; infancia; racismo; Jan Elliot.

reconsiderando a escola em tempos dolorosos: uma conversa final-inicial

resumo

Este artigo consiste em uma conversa epistolar entre dois acadêmicos experientes no campo da filosofia da infância em torno de diferentes dimensões da escola. Partindo de um diagnóstico compartilhado do estado atual do mundo onde a ambição, falsidade, corrupção, cinismo, crueldade e violência na política e no discurso público prevalecem, uma busca comum por um (novo) começo de outro mundo – um *novum* – é realizada. O conceito de infância desempenha um papel central nesta conversa, inspirado pelo pensamento utópico de vários intelectuais proféticos: Deleuze e Guattari e o "tornar-se criança"; a "alegría" de Spinoza; a "nova sensibilidade" de Marcuse; a "renovação da percepção" romântica ou a "limpeza" das "portas da percepção" de William Blake; a relação de Paulo Freire com o conceito de "começo" e o círculo de "começo-meio-começo" de Nego Bispo. O conteúdo e a forma de uma carta geral de intenções para as pessoas adultas que participam da formação de uma hipotética escola utópica são discutidos, imaginando a relação de tal escola com o

espaço e tempo vividos, corpo, animais, plantas, amor, amizade, igualdade, esperança, errar, alegria, questionamento, escuta, criação e sonho. No mesmo contexto, o conhecido experimento antirracista de olhos azuis/olhos castanhos de Jane Elliot nos anos 1960 é apresentado para problematizar o poder da escola como uma comunidade intencional adulto-criança que pode se auto-organizar para funcionar como um potencial terreno de transformação pessoal e social, tanto para alunas/os quanto para professoras/es. A conversa termina, paradoxalmente, com a afirmação do começo como uma força infantil na escolarização.

palavras-chave: escola; começo; infância; racismo; Jane Elliot.

reconsidering school in painful times: an ending-beginning conversation

David Kennedy: I'm still thinking (if waiting for ideas from the unconscious can be called thinking) for a word from the sub-liminal realm in response to your most generous proposal of a last/first conversation—a conversation prompted at least in part, by my retirement from the university one year ago. Retirement is for me increasingly a journey into the unknown—an unknown represented for an 82 year-old like me as the ultimate unknown, death—but also an unknown haunted by the sudden onset of what is increasingly a world-situation of extreme darkness, a darkness dominated by a handful of inhuman (or deeply deluded humans—the outcome is the same) people whose greed, venality, mendacity, corruption, cynicism, cruelty and vulgarity represent a profound shock to the whole “system” of my thought up until now. My mild utopian musings of the last 30 years or so, embodied in educational theory, are being violently trampled by apocalyptic forebodings, and I'm struggling to find a position of hope, a place to stand as the future rushes in like a tidal wave. Are we, as a species, at the beginning of world-transformation or a hellish end? I'll keep on waiting...

Walter Kohan: Maybe we have already begun this last/first conversation? Let me pay attention to some words that seem to have importance in your actual state of spirit: thinking, journey, unknown, death, darkness, hope ... and the opposition between the beginning of world-transformation or a hellish end... I share this feeling about the world which might also be perceived as a moment of hellish beginning, to combine your opposition. You cannot have synthesized it better: greed, venality, mendacity, corruption, cynicism, cruelty, and vulgarity all together in a generous density. Living in a highly racist society as Brazil, I have only one concern with the word “darkness” due to its racial connotations. And suspending that word, I still read lots of things in your words: fear of the unknown and also fear of losing our privileged philosophical state of knowing and knowers; and also of losing our privileged existential position of knowing our finitude without being able to manage the end of our finitude; so death is this

paradoxical state that is an essential part of human life but at the same time denies or brings it to an end. And here is where our state of childhood appears: we do not want to end but to begin or connect an end to a beginning. In this sense, we want to turn the end of life into a beginning of (a new) life. So that new questions (beginnings) arise: how can we live and celebrate our childhood when the “real and last” end seems to be coming closer and closer? Is it possible to experience a childlike end (death)? Can we still live as a child when the world seems to be in a completely unchildlike state? Do these questions have any meaning for you?

David Kennedy: Tellingly enough, one of the invectives I left out of my accusatory rant about the criminal fascists now running the show in my country was the word “hypocrisy.” Your list of what we stand to lose in this age of ending/beginning uncovers this unconscious self-deception. By standing up, speaking out, protesting the evil around us, we stand to lose that privilege you invoke. To speak out is to be willing to lose your comfortable existence: to lose your job, your money, even to be deported, imprisoned, tortured, executed. I’m sure both Brazil and Argentina know this very well, and it is a lesson that has always been arriving in the US. but now has actually arrived like a storm against the wall. In relation to radical evil we, the bourgeoisie, are involuntary hypocrites, those who stand on the sideline wringing our hands. Those who actually resist and attempt to model a next step, an evolutionary dialectic, a *novum*, risk losing everything, including their lives, without any assurance that change will ever come, or – if it does, will come within the next century or two, or will come only as a new beginning on the ashes of civilization. Who knows, maybe similar moments of apocalyptic ending or beginning have happened more than once in the billions of years of the earth’s history.

But putting all despair and apprehension aside, what about that next step, the *novum*? Assuming the best, assuming that we are on the verge, not of an ultimate degradation and cataclysmic end but of an evolutionary leap forward, how does that concern childhood? How would it be a childlike leap? Well, we have both made much of the Deleuzian concept of “becoming child,” and its connection with Spinozan joy as the release and empowerment of happy affect. I would characterize it as a sense of enlargement, a form of sensory awareness or

world-openness that the poets Wordsworth (1807) and Traherne (1960) identified in Romantic language—“There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream, the earth, and every common sight, to me did seem appareled in celestial light, the glory and the freshness of a dream”—and which the mystical philosophical plant neurologist Stephen Harrod Buhner (2014) identified as the relative absence of “sensory gating”—that is, a form of awareness or attention that is open on a neurological level to all stimuli—that has not learned to block out the existential experience of a deeper self-encompassing reality, a condition of “interbeing” with the world. And I would dare say that this form of awareness maps squarely onto Herbert Marcuse’s (1969) vision of a “new sensibility” or non-repressive civilization, an instinctual revulsion at violence and domination, a liberation of the mind and of the body, from aggressive and repressive needs” embodied in a new form of “sensual reason.” On this account, the Romantic “renovation of perception,” or William Blake’s “cleansing” of the “doors of perception” results in an evolutionary advance—one that is announced perennially in childhood, and can be reappropriated in adulthood through education and culture. So, it is this new, “childish” culture of world-openness that provides the model for advance toward a new kind of brain, in which the higher and lower functions are in a new, evolved relation. This world-openness is what childhood teaches us, and our vocation as adults is to regain it—to widen the doors of perception.

Now, what relevance does that utopian speculation have in the present circumstances? I lived with the expectation of the new sensibility for the greater part of my life. It has been the basis for choosing teaching and scholarship as a vocation. I find its intimations and expressions, however partial, present and announced in the great majority of fellow humans that I meet and know. In other words, for me it is already here: that evolutionary brain change is already happening. It is only evil men—and I mean mostly men—who, as Sun Tzu said, will “burn down their nation to rule over the ashes”—who continually subvert it. True, there are millions of mental slaves who will follow them and enforce their murderous injustices, which raises the question of the problem of evil. Where does it come from? Can education—of any kind—eradicate it? Whatever these questions, the evolutionary writing is, so to speak, on the wall, and is written in the language of love. This dramatic and perilous moment in history may, all

appearances to the contrary, be the preliminary moment of what Marcuse called the “great revolt” against sadistic, persecutory, unjust cultures and institutions, and the ushering in of that new age we all long for—that “becoming more” that Freire (2005) identified as the human vocation. What makes it different for 82 year-old me this time around is that, apart from a miracle, I will not witness it. What was previously an expectation has now become only a faith, and even that faith is experiencing a troubled kind of astonishment at the evil that is being unleashed on the world at this moment. And if I lose that faith, where does that leave me?

Walter Kohan: Dear brother, thank you for such a sincere, precise, and unblemished narrative of your perception of this present, complex, and sad planetary moment. I agree with you that the near future is worrying, even frightening. In the last decades, I have been increasingly trying to avoid the big narratives, in all directions and maybe because of an unconscious self-protective impulse I avoid them more than ever these days. But not only because of that: also, because we never know. Life can (re)begin anywhere, anytime... Besides, big narratives have never been accurate, why they should be now? Finally, it is a matter of survival: as you would phrase it, we can never lose our faith in a loving life...

I prefer, then, to put my energy on the minor, on the little quotidian things we do every day, our making of school at school or at the university: this small conversation with a teacher when she tells me she cannot be the same teacher she has been, that unexpected question from a child and the conversation that unfolds from it, that timeless hug with a friend with whom we find new meanings to begin: this first/last conversation among us which is a form of celebrating educational and philosophical friendship; the bright eyes of that seventy year old student questioning for the first time in her life... It is in these little events that I find energy to begin... and begin again... and again... and again. As for your last intervention, I appreciate your retaking Deleuze’s and Guattari’s becoming-child together with Spinoza’s joyful affect as a kind of opening of new forms of inhabiting the world. I also feel sensitive to your worries about time, especially the future and what is coming next. And I am deeply touched by your questions

expressed at the second paragraph of your intervention: “But putting all despair and apprehension aside, what about that next step, the *novum*? Assuming the best, assuming that we are on the verge, not of an ultimate degradation and cataclysmic end but of an evolutionary leap forward, how does that concern childhood? How would it be a childlike leap?” Let me rephrase your question: where can we perceive the revolutionary position of childhood? Or phrased differently: how is childhood related to a (new) beginning? Let me give a long round before coming back to these questions, and share with you some of the things that I have been reading about and also some encounters I’ve been experiencing with indigenous and afro-indigenous in Brazil that have helped me to realize something that is also related to your concerns, in particular about time. You know that future time is a matter of Chronos and that there is no future in Aion. So, if Aion is the time of childhood, then there is no future in the time of childhood, which means that the future of childhood is an adultcentric idea, imposed on children. In recent times, while travelling in the north and northeast of Brazil, I was taught that the idea of begin-middle-end is also adultcentric and colonialist, and that in the confluence of different *cosmoi*, afro-indigenous people see time as moving in the pattern begin-middle-begin, a kind of *aionic* circle, different from a chronological segment (Santos et al., 2025). I will take this up again, but just let me share with you the idea that things don’t necessarily begin and continue as a means to an end (usually placed in the future and perceived in terms of production, results, aim, objectives, outcomes), but as a means to begin again and again in a durative present. To say it in different words, we begin, continue and then we begin again. I’ll come back to this idea before we end this conversation.

Can you imagine the impact on our educational practices if we suspended the idea of ending and multiplied the idea of beginning? Or if we inhabit the present time and resist the insistent systemic project of displacement to the future? Yes, I can imagine objections and questions: “but the educational system is more and more about results, products, outcomes” ... “educational policies are increasingly focused on evaluating the outcomes of educational learning” ... “children need end-goals to arrive at and focus their lives”, etc, etc, etc. I am not denying that a lot of contrary forces exist that attempt to capture our form of being in the world, especially as educators, but this does not mean that we cannot think

and live otherwise. It has always been the case. This “otherwise” is what I and a group of people gathered under the name “Center of Philosophies and Childhoods” (NEFI) of the State University of Rio de Janeiro have been trying to practice in recent years, under the banner of what we call an errant and philosophically childlike pedagogy of (self) questioning. We know that questions are forms of beginning and answers are forms of ending, and education is eager for answers, but when we question, we open a path and a time in thinking. When we move into an answer we travel into the future and to an end. When we move into other questions we travel in the present, the time of thinking, to new beginnings. Usually, we are told by lovers of endings that one who questions does not know, and that the one who answers is the knower, but we prefer to consider that some questions and some collective questionings require a lot of knowledge and that we can learn and think a lot just by travelling from a beginning to another beginning, and from one question to another question, always remaining present in the present.¹

Now that we are beginning (not ending!) this intervention, let me take one other lovely question/beginning from you: “Now, what relevance does that utopian speculation have in the present circumstances?” I will try not to answer this question so as not to give it an end but to move to other questions/beginnings. And I think that some crucial beginnings linked to yours are, on one hand, the meaning and temporality of utopia and, on the other, the way we understand the present. What would your question mean if we think of utopia as present, i.e. as something that is not postponed to another time but that is experienced in the unique present time we are living? Can we experience utopia in our present? Think for example about this conversation: could we relate to it as a utopian conversation in the present? Thanks for being there, brother, and of course there is much to think and fortunately we are only at the beginning of this conversation...

¹ Barbara Weber, reviewer of this text, put it very nicely: “Maybe a question for educators could be: how can we create a welcoming space, for ‘newcomers’ to remain beginners ... Schooling has moved all the way to a chronological, information-transfer system ... Learning (etymologically) means to ‘follow a trace’ ... can we see learning spaces as following traces both into the past and the future, by creating fields of present?”.

David Kennedy: The shocking and painful events of this young century cast a dark shadow on the human species. Thousands of innocents have met violent sudden death at the hands of predatory “leaders” and criminal gangs (under the definition of which I include the military) or have been displaced in a culture of crisis, cruelty and indifference; and millions of refugees attempting to flee those predators have been reduced to “bare life.” Who are we humans anyway? – what kind of monstrous animal are we? Well, in fact we are not that monstrous animal, but we are not fully human either, and it is only by recognizing the monster in ourselves that we are positioned to experience the passage from *necrophilia* to *biophilia* that is becoming human. Our vocation is the journey of Nietzsche’s (1999) tightrope walker – “Man is a rope, tied between beast and overman [read: human] – a rope over an abyss.” The journey of becoming “more” human is a tightrope walk that is never finished. The process of affective opening and enlargement, of the capacity to live and breath in joyful energy and loving caring relation, the sense of a miraculous present, a present in which past and future are sublimated in the *now* – this is in fact the *novum* that Deleuze and Guattari (1987) characterize as becoming child. This process is only inaugurated by confronting our own inner darkness in the form of what psychoanalysts call shadow work; it is only when we recognize and acknowledge the shadow, when we own it, that the *novum* becomes visible, possible. And the *novum* presents itself to us as new values, and not just new values but a new body, newly connected with the animal, and thus in a new relationship with all of nature – the Cartesian body-mind split deconstructed, healed through a process of deterritorialization; and not really a “new” body, but in fact the child body, signified by, as you described it, a sublation of past and future – “moving in the pattern begin-middle-begin.”

The human is always becoming. There is no future, but only becoming future. Is this the temporality of utopia? And can it be embodied in social institutions, formalized in a culture? Can the school – that designated ground of encounter between adults and children – act as an aionic time-space, a *templum tempus*, a form of temporality which embodies Bergson’s “duration”? And speaking of duration, I’m sorry, but I can’t resist quoting from a wonderful paper by Elizabeth Grosz (2005):

Duration is difference, the inevitable force of differentiation and elaboration, which is also another name for becoming. Becoming is the operation of self-differentiation, the elaboration of a difference within a thing, a quality or a system that emerges or actualizes only in duration. Duration is the 'field' in which difference lives and plays itself out. Duration is that which undoes as well as what makes: to the extent that duration entails an open future, it involves the fracturing and opening up of the past and the present to what is virtual in them, to what in them differs from the actual, to what in them can bring forth the new. This unbecoming is the very motor of becoming, making the past and present not given but fundamentally ever-altering, virtual. (p. 1)

Could we use this quote in our school's "Letter to Parents"? What do you think? What might a school dedicated to living this process look like, feel like, talk like? What do we do there all day long? *childhood & philosophy* has featured a number of articles that explore the larger issues associated with re-imagining school, but they all, to my knowledge, speak from a position of critique of the ongoing subjection of the institution to adultocentric, colonialist structures and patterns of activity and relation. On the brighter side, there have been—and are at present—schools that mean to actualize an aionic space, that reimagine the adult-child encounter from a utopian perspective—keeping in mind that, as Marcuse (1969) put it, utopia is only “that which is blocked from coming about by the power of established societies.” In fact, there is a long tradition of such schools, from Summerhill to Sudbury Valley to Self-Directed Education to the Danish Folkeskole to Consensus Based Education to the unschooling movement, and more. Surely, we are not alone, and I don't doubt that you have observed similar patterns of activity and relation in some of the schools you have visited in Brazil over the years.

To return to our question, “assuming that we are on the verge, not of an ultimate degradation and cataclysmic end but of an evolutionary leap forward,” what would that leap look like? How would it manifest, especially in its beginnings? At least one preliminary sign would be the weakening influence or deterritorialization of “the power of established societies,” and it is in the open space that results from that weakening that the *novum* first shows its face. Maybe that weakening is already in progress, and those schools and movements mentioned above are emerging in the open space? Maybe they are first signs of the evolutionary leap? Of course, “leap” might be the wrong word; perhaps we

should speak of “drift” or “reterritorialization” instead; and it is also my belief that there have always, from the beginning of the species, been individuals—Bergson’s “moral heroes” or “world historic individuals”—who manifest the *novum*. There are people who are already tuned in to the next evolutionary step, and they are from every class and vocation and social station. I think especially of the educators among them; in fact, it seems to me that we find them especially among those who have dedicated their lives to the encounter with childhood, drawn by the very form of life we have been discussing— becoming child. As such, the intentional community of the school is a key evolutionary space in the larger human community.

Walter Kohan: Thanks, brother, for your thoughtful and provocative response. Excuse me for this following first comment but let me react with some specific topics as I feel immediately inclined to after reading your words. First, I am troubled by the use of some words, such as “dark,” and “shadow,” with a negative connotation as well as others like “clear,” and “bright,” with a positive connotation. The use of these words has troubled me a lot in recent times because of the racist implications they carry. We are sickened by Enlightenment and how it permeates our lives, and this is probably more obvious and disturbing in colonized societies like the one I live in. Of course, I am not accusing you of anything, or saying that those who use these words are being racist, but what bothers me is that we are constantly reproducing a racist dimension of language, or to put it more precisely, what troubles me is that through our racist languages we are continually constructing the racist societies we live in. For sure, it is not only the case of racism but also sexism, adultism and so on; this is just what becomes evident to me now. And once we recognize this dimension, we cannot be innocent about it anymore or continue reinforcing it through language. This is why I am making it explicit how I increasingly feel about the politics of our colonizing language. Still related to the politics of language I have also more and more concerns with the appeals to a more than human, overman or whatever concept trying to make a separation within humans and about the impact of that appeal in our relationship with our animality and other animals. It seems that much of the actual predatory global situation is connected to our lack of

understanding of the communality of our being humans as well as our disconnection from the earth as a living being with all its diversity of beings.

I love your quotation of Elizabeth Grosz. Yes, I agree that school as *schole* or “free time” is about duration, difference (or *differance* as Derrida would say), differentiation, becoming, play, openness. But at the same time this wonderful ontological statement does not seem to be enough; there is also need of space (earth), body, animals, love, plants, friendship, equality, hope, errantry, joy... and childhood (among many other things). You make a wonderful invitation/challenge to think a “Letter to Parents” and to think about what we would include in such a letter. I confess that even if I found Grosz’s paragraph extraordinary, I wouldn’t include it in such a letter. Well, maybe we could include it in a long letter in the section about time... And I imagine your follow-up question which would be not at all easy to respond: “What other texts, then, would you include in such a letter?” And I also wonder if that paragraph should be included not only in a hypothetical letter to parents but also in a hypothetical letter to students, educators, workers and anyone connected in some way or another to our school. I like the idea of a letter and I wonder if we need more than one letter to those connected in all different forms to school or if it would be enough with something like an open letter to those who want to enter our school no matter in what position or disposition they are, including plants, trees, animals... So, this seems to me one of the first issues we need to think about: one or more letters? And together with this question to whom do we want to write a letter about our school?

I would try with one, and let’s think about such a letter. Thinking about possible inspiring texts and going back to our beginning, a beautiful and enigmatic sentence that Paulo Freire offers to Myles Horton comes to me, in that lovely conversation that was afterwards published as a co-authored book entitled, *We make the road by walking* (Horton & Freire, 1990). The context is a conversation in which Horton has described to Freire the beginnings of his work at Highlander and asks for Freire’s feedback on the story he has told. Freire begins his response by affirming that he too would like to say something about his beginnings “... in which I still am, because I always am in the beginning, like you.” (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 55), then affirms that being at the beginning has to do with creating and

dreaming. Of course this is just a small quotation and we could add some other verbs that we imagine Paulo Freire would like to add while being at the beginning, for example, questioning, listening, erring, loving... among equals, in community... and while many might also wonder whether these words are Paulo Freire's or mine or ours I would still love to unfold such an epigraph with these words, specially the verbs we think constitute an educator as a beginner and a caregiver and instigator of beginnings, and a school as a beginning form of educational encounter.

So, brother, this is the sentence I would begin our letter with, or as an epigraph: "This school is always at the beginning" or maybe "In this school we are always at the beginning," meaning that this is a childlike school in a sense of childhood that echoes Mia Couto, the Mozambiquean poet when he affirms that childhood is not an age but a time, a time "when it is not too late" (Couto, 2009), to which I would add "to begin." So that we inhabit childhood when we feel it is not too late to begin, and a childlike school is one that considers that it is never too late to begin. Even in a world where it seems that we are close to its end in this school is never too late to begin. I wonder if you like this epigraph and if you would like to write this letter together. If you agree, we already have the epigraph. And to whom should we address the letter? To anyone who wants to enter this school, including animals and plants? Or to anyone disposed to be part of this school? Or to parents, teachers, students, workers and... of this school? Should we name this school? How? Which name would we give to it? Or should we rather wait till it begins and then think about its name? Where should this school be located? Should it be public? Should it be communal? Should it be free? Should it be located in a house? Maybe we do not agree on the school we are imagining, but is it worthwhile trying?

David Kennedy: "ATTENTION! A message from the Central Committee and the Ministry of Language: From henceforth and by decree, all uses, spoken or written, of the words "dark," or "shadow," as well as the terms "clear," "bright" or any related words, shall be removed from public discourse, thereby removing the curse of dualism from the Western imaginary once and for all. Henceforth, the word "light" shall be changed to "not-dark," and the word "dark" to "not-light."

Genesis 1 will now read: “And God said, “Let there be not-dark,” and there was not-dark. God saw that the not-dark was good, and he separated the not-dark from the not-light. God called the not-dark “day,” and the not-light he called “night.” And there was evening, and there was morning – the first day. Moreover, all references to or invocations of the Zoroastrian good=light evil=darkness dualism shall be strictly prohibited.”

Sorry brother, forgive me, I couldn't resist :). I'm not a Zoroastrian by any stretch of the imagination, but I am, I suppose a Hegelian (or post-Hegelian), according to which transformation is driven by contradiction; and I do find “there was evening and there was morning” a most fundamental ontological given and, in fact, a deep existential comfort. Where would we be without the comforting darkness of night, in which the glories and struggles of the day are transformed into archetypal dream material? As for the racist/colonialist applications of this most fundamental distinction to culture, skin color, intelligence, morality, educability, etc., that's a paranoid trope, a collective disease, present everywhere, as old as the species itself; there must always be, it seems, an outgroup, a dangerous Other. And as for the “dark shadow cast over the human species” to which I so melodramatically refer above, I struggle for another word to describe our current planetary moment. However, I will attempt to follow your advice and to “put my energy on the minor, on the little quotidian things we do every day,” which is no doubt wise council.

And to connect with your second concern, I too have a negative reaction to the “overman,” but have come to believe that Nietzsche was not foreshadowing Nazi delusion, and that there is in fact a strong correlation between Freire's (2005) human vocation of becoming “more” (“This movement of inquiry must be directed towards humanization – man's historical vocation”), Nietzsche's tightrope walker, and Marcuse's new sensibility. Nietzsche's “overman” is not a god but rather, it seems to me, exactly the human that you are dreaming when you invoke a human sensibility aware of our “relationship with animality and other animals,” of the “communality of our being humans,” and “our connectivity with the earth as a living being with all its diversity of beings.” This is just what comes to me in considering Marcuse's (1969) vision of the *novum* – “a non-repressive civilization” characterized by “an instinctual revulsion at violence and domination, a liberation

of the mind and of the body, from aggressive and repressive needs” embodied in a new form of “sensual reason.” And it is significant, I think, that Marcuse speaks of a “civilization” rather than a collection of enlightened individualists, for as Freire (2005) says, “The pursuit of full humanity cannot be carried out in isolation or individualism, but only in fellowship and solidarity; therefore, it cannot unfold in the antagonistic relations between oppressors and oppressed. No one can be authentically human while he prevents others from being so.”

So how about this school, the one that is always at the beginning? My suggestion that the Elizabeth Grosz quote be included in the parent manual was a bit ironical, but it does encapsulate the whole thing in a paragraph--a sort of magical language trick, or an arcane mathematical equation. But how do we plan, where do we begin in the practical realization of a school that stays at the beginning, whose energies encompass (in your words) “space (earth), body, animals, love, plants, friendship, equality, hope, errantry, joy... questioning, listening, creating, dreaming ...among equals, in community.” It might be argued that this vision only exists as an antithesis to school as a radically adultocentric institution “more and more worried and demanding results, products, outcomes” “increasingly focused on evaluating the outcomes of educational learning”; the means driven by “ends children ‘need’ in order to arrive at and focus their lives, etc, etc, etc...” If we think of the situation in this dialectical way, then we might find ourselves in search of--or just awaiting the arrival of--a synthesis, a third thing, an *aufgehoben*, a sublation. And it’s my conviction that one way of approaching this third thing, this *novum*, is through intensely practical imagination—through imagining the real.

What, in fact, if one section of the letter was devoted to the curriculum in the form of descriptions of three or four inquiry projects that were being carried out by small groups of students? The description would include an account of how they were chosen, making it clear that student voice and agency were central in the process. Another section of the letter might be a transcript from a weekly whole school governance meeting, in which practical, school-wide issues were discussed and voted on. Another section might include short written pieces by students, whether poetry, philosophical reflection, fiction, reports on field trips, or editorial comment on school matters. Another might provide reports on

school-community projects, whether involving feeding the hungry or helping the homeless, or caring for the environment in some way. And now I realize that my idea of one letter has morphed into a weekly or monthly newsletter, and of course this would be produced— assembled and printed--by students, and constitute an ongoing student project. One could look to the wonderful schools organized by Celestin Freinet in the 1920's for the realization of this particular practice².

In fact, a study of the history of anarchist and progressive schooling since, say, the French Revolution in Europe would include the heyday of Progressivism and the Free School movement of the 60's in the US; the contemporary international Democratic Schools movement and the Sociocracy movement today; and, as you have so wonderfully chronicled (Kohan, 2015), Simón Rodríguez in South America. There are, in short, multiple examples of “something like” the school we are dreaming, some of them alive and well today—Freinet, La Ruche, Summerhill, Sands School, Sudbury Valley School, to name just a few—and no doubt countless unsung experiments. For me, this suggests that the school as an archetypal space of the adult-child encounter is perennial, an intrinsically “creative and dreaming” space of interaction between the time “that is not too late” of childhood, and the time of adulthood--which, perhaps paradoxically, is the time of becoming-child, of the praxis of what Freire calls the “revolutionary futurity” of “beings aware of [our] incompleteness.” As such, his dictum “The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach” is no mere facile reversal, but fundamental to education understood as the practice of (r)evolutionary futurity.

Brother, I fear I may have dragged us off the road, but not too fearful, since the road is made by walking. And I have to say, although not to provoke you, that I am still preoccupied—and this is a preoccupation that is founded on actual experience—with the “dark” (or not-light?) side of human social and political life: the invisible pull of power, conformity, anti-conformity, narcissism, delusion selfishness, hypocrisy competition, sadism, mendacity, manipulation--sociopathy in all its forms. These divisive, corrosive, destructive human energies that in fact are write large in the world situation today are also present possibilities wherever

² <https://www.amisdefreinet.org/the-life-and-works-of-celestin-freinet/>

groups form. In fact, I admire your determination to “avoid the big narratives,” your optimistic view that “life can (re)begin anywhere, anytime...” and your “faith in a loving life,” putting your “energy in the minor, on the little quotidian things we do every day.” I admire you deeply for these qualities, and see it as a form of courage. I also believe—and this from experience as well—that, to use a religious metaphor, “wherever two or three are gathered together, Christ is in their midst,” and that the possibilities of “revolutionary futurity” are, as the anarchist Gustav Landauer put it, a “seed beneath the snow,” whose time will come or is always beginning, and which shows itself to us in premonitions and prefigurations. I do believe in C.S. Peirce’s (1966) universe of evolutionary love and unexpected opportunity (*agape* and *tyche*), but it is difficult to forget that the gentle Landauer was brutally murdered by right-wing paramilitary thugs. And having gone on too long, I will leave it to you, with your gift for creating and dreaming, to continue fleshing out our always-beginning school.

Walter Kohan: You made me laugh a lot brother! Thank you for that... I had tried to avoid being ridiculous, but obviously I failed. And even though I appreciate your good-humored anarchist-Hegelian-Nietzschean reaction I think there is still a meaningful point in what I was trying to show about language. And of course, this is not about art or poetry but just about how we deal with words, especially in a philosophical education. In this respect, I can elaborate a couple of responses to the first part of your response. I confess I am tempted to double the bet and to consider your response a non-surprising reaction of someone who, like me, belongs to the privileged, white, male, heterosexual group that cannot even feel what is it to be racialized by language, i.e., as the reaction of privileged whiteness. In this sense, humor and irony might be understood as a way of negating what simply cannot be felt, or what it prefers, consciously or not, not to discuss... in which case it will continue operating as it works now.

Connected to this dimension, the accusation of “paranoid” is also complicated, brother, because of the political implications it has in the way it uses “normality” as a pattern to include/exclude discourses not aligned with the dominant one. I am pretty sure, brother, that you are familiar with Foucault’s insistence in uncovering the political implications of this use of medical terms, and

you are denouncing racism as a “paranoid trope, a collective disease.” Both paranoid and disease are medical terms, outcomes of a form of rationality that excludes what does not conform to the norm as abnormal, paranoic, insane, etc. We have, on the one hand, the enlightened, the reasonable, the white, the men, the heterosexual, i.e., the sane, and on the other the unclear, the obscure, the insane, the black, women. And also the racists. This rationality is unbeatable: it excludes every possible challenge, from all political directions. It is colored and white at the same time, clear, enlightened, and of course, democratic, tolerant, multicultural, etc., etc., etc.; obscurity and blackness have no place on it, as also racism does not have, and both extremes need to be disqualified and unconsidered. Of course, I realize that I am exposing myself to being placed in an even deeper ridiculous position in your next response... but the feeling prevails in me that there is a very serious issue we need to confront in making school, even though I might not have been very happy in my exposition of it. And also, there is some dissatisfaction I do not want to ignore each time I pronounce words that are associated with reason or a lack of it depending on the color of skin they report to. Why should reason be linked just to one color and others be excluded from it? So, I prefer to expose myself to a new ridiculous position than to silence. These are not issues our school can be indifferent to, I think.

Another confession I need to make is that I have problems with “dialectic,” “opposition” and “overcoming contradictions.” So, I must try again to push you back to the minor. I very much like the idea of school underlying your collaborative newsletter produced by students: actual childlike projects being carried out, student governance, art, poetry, philosophy, fiction, field trips, school-community interaction, earth care... it all sounds promising as well as the examples you gave us for inspiration... on another note, my initial idea of a (beginning) letter for a beginning school was replaced by a regular newsletter, which seems entirely appealing... so I wonder how we might end this dialogue without really ending it or, better, ending it with a form of beginning... I’ve tried an inviting letter and I failed... a regular newsletter, I agree, is a much nicer idea. A couple of possibilities come to me: The first one would be co-writing a letter to anyone interested in beginning a school... Something, rather simple, short, like “Letter for school beginners” ... another option that comes to me is that each of us

write just a number of questions that we have both learned in this conversation... as a question might be a childhood-beginning for thinking, ending with a short number of questions, like five, or seven, or ten would be offering some beginnings to our readers... do either of these two possible ending-beginnings attract you brother?

David Kennedy: Well brother, I would prefer to let sleeping dogs lie as far as the language/racism/reason issue goes, given the sense that, as you put it, it may be impossible for two privileged, white, male, heterosexuals to really understand what it feels like to be racialized. I might plead for a distinction between "reason" and "rationalism," but that would no doubt take us further afield. I am, however, idiosyncratically reminded of a famous (and according to some, infamous) educational object lesson from the 1960's. In the immediate aftermath of Martin Luther King's assassination and one child's question of why it happened, a teacher of a class of elementary level children proposed an experiment to which they agreed as a sort of game. As of that day, she told them, it was to be understood that her blue-eyed students were genetically inferior to the brown-eyed students, and the latter were told not to play with them on the jungle gym or swings. Elliott imposed arbitrary rules on blue-eyed students, such as limiting their lunch portions and forcing them to use paper cups at the water fountain. She told them not to waste time on homework, suggesting they would likely get it wrong because "that's just how blue-eyed kids are." Over the course of the week, brown-eyed students, who typically struggled in school, began performing better, while the blue-eyed students, who were usually high achievers, started making mistakes. Shy brown-eyed students grew more confident and outgoing, while more social blue-eyed students became quieter.

Initially, the blue-eyed students resisted the idea that brown-eyed children were superior. In response, Elliott falsely told them that melanin was linked to higher intelligence and learning ability. This explanation quickly ended their resistance. The brown-eyed students, now considered superior, became more arrogant, bullying their blue-eyed classmates. Their test scores improved, and they excelled in tasks that had once been difficult for them. Meanwhile, the blue-eyed students became timid and submissive, their academic performance slipping even

on simpler tasks. They scored poorly on tests and began to isolate themselves during recess, even those who had previously been the class leaders. On the playground, the brown-eyed students taunted and excluded the blue-eyed students.

The following Monday, Elliott switched things around, declaring the blue-eyed children as superior. Although the blue-eyed students taunted the brown-eyed students similarly to the previous day, the behavior was less harsh. Elliott then asked the children to write about what they had learned from the experience. For many, reflecting on the exercise as adults revealed a lasting understanding that helped protect them from prejudices and racism throughout their lives³.

Its long-term consequences notwithstanding, Elliott was subjected to intense criticism for performing this experiment, but in a way, it does suggest the power of the school as an adult-child intentional community and a place to engage in what has been referred to as “extraordinary investigations.” It at least invokes the question of how schools might self-organize in order to function as a potential ground of personal and social transformation, both for students and teachers. Or is the school doomed, in our age anyway, to function as a site for crude social reproduction, an “ideological state apparatus,” as Althusser (2008) characterized it? So, let that act as a basis for my first question: *What can school be?* But let that question be complicated by another, provoked by the various reactions to the blue and brown eyes experiment: *How does power work in school? How should power work in school?* And if, heeding Foucault, power is inevitable, *is there a form of power that is specific to childhood?* Are those enough for a start, brother?

Walter Kohan: Dear brother, thank you for letting me know about Elliot’s experiment. It is astonishing. I do agree with many of the criticism she received but no critique takes out the need to think about the consequences of what she found out. Even though it is deeply irritating, among other things, the position she gave to children and the way she treated them, the way all the humans she experimented with reacted needs to be carefully considered and understood. Many things surprise me, especially the lack of firm and sustained rebellion from

³ https://www.skeptic.com/reading_room/blue-eyes-brown-eyes-jane-elliott-prejudice-experiment/

those subjected to the experiment, going beyond an initial “in favor or against” position. And she then replicated it with adults, so it is not only or not mainly about children. I think the experiment, among other issues, deeply shows the risks and potentialities of schooling. And your questions are much more than welcome. So, let me end my intervention in this conversation by coupling questions to your questions: *What can school be?* What makes school be the school it is? And the complicated ones: *How does power work in school?* What does it teach the way we exercise power in school? *How could or should power work in school?* Can we make our exercise of power in school a caring exercise of teaching? And the Foucaultian one: *is there a form of power that is specific to a childlike school?* Can we create a school powered by childhood? Are those enough for a start, brother? Love and thank you for the joy of thinking together.

David Kennedy: I think that one thing that the blue-eyed/brown-eyed experiment suggests for us is indeed the question of power, and the role of the school as a space dedicated to “deep” or “strong” democracy, which I see as equivalent to what is now termed “social anarchism” as originally articulated in Kropotkin and Proudhon, Bakunin, Malatesta and others in the 19th century. The main attribute of social anarchism is the decentralization of power, through a variety of cooperative collective systems, and social collaboration is understood as a means to achieve a spontaneous order through their interaction. As such, school as a democratic dispositif is the place where we learn to do that through practicing it. This model is already in place, both historically as mentioned above, and contemporaneously in the democratic school movement. Elliot’s experiment is a sort of negative example, in demonstrating for us the power of the social imaginary in the space of school, and further, children’s vulnerability to manipulation.

So, let’s imagine a school that is structured for children’s voluntary participation in the life and management of the school and the sharing of power. To meet these criteria, I think several conditions would need to be met. One would be scale: no more than a hundred or so students max--the number beyond which a certain familiarity and sense of community becomes more difficult. This would also suggest community schools, which offers the opportunity for local activism;

here the students may become involved as bearers of the conscience of the community: working to save and enhance the environment and to protest injustices wherever they find them; and to share responsibility for dealing with injustice or persecution within their own school community. Many democratic schools maintain a judicial committee, where complaints can be aired and adjudicated by the students themselves and larger issues of school operation are taken up in an all-school weekly meeting⁴ ().

Another key issue in question of power has to do with the curriculum—with what is studied and how. Some democratic schools give complete freedom to do whatever they want to do, all day long. Others, which I prefer, develop a system whereby both students and teachers are encouraged to propose projects, sometimes in relation to an all-school theme like climate change or poverty, or something related to their own community. On this plan, both teachers and students present their ideas to the whole school at the beginning of the term. Sign-up sheets are then posted on a bulletin board, and students put their names on the ones they are interested in. There might be a cap for the number of people who can sign up for one—maybe 10—but a project can also be carried out by one person, or a pair. Then the teacher designs activities that are based in the different content areas and divides them among the students to perform. In other words, you want to teach the content areas (math, history, science, literature, anthropology, geography) in the context of the project under study. For example, if the project were “Music of the Native Americans,” members of the group or subgroups of the 15 students would listen to recordings, learn songs, (music), identify songs of different tribes and different styles (geography), learn about the pow-ow (anthropology), study the history of one people and their music (history) study the rhythms and intervals of indigenous music (math/music), make a drum and a rattle themselves (craft), read a book about Native American life (e.g. literature), and so on. They would culminate the project with a musical performance, a poster display, or a display of the instruments they have made.

Other possible projects are: the world migration crisis; nuclear weapons; income inequality (lots of math here); climate change; racism in America; a

⁴ <https://sudburyvalley.org/essays/why-does-sudbury-school-work>

popular or classic book (e.g. Harry Potter, Robinson Crusoe); the history of some old building in town (e.g. the post office or the library); wild animals in the city (coyotes, raccoons, ground hogs); migrating birds; the life of trees; the Aztec or Mayan civilizations; famous explorers; a famous painter and his/her time, the history of football. ... The idea of this hypothetical example is to balance power and agency between students and teachers. It does not rule out the possibility of long periods of free time during the school day, or frequent field trips, or frequent sessions of philosophical dialogue—in fact the latter acts as a discursive basis for direct democratic group governance.

What am I getting at here, and why am I zigzagging clumsily along our shared path? I guess because when I ask myself the question *what can a school be?* I get very concrete images: of space (various sized rooms, pathways, multiple commons, indoor-outdoor interfaces, natural light), of time (segmentation, flow, spontaneity, flexibility), of grouping (large & small, individual, fluid), of curriculum (project-based, multidisciplinary, emergent, polysymbolic, individualized), of pedagogy (dialogical, interactive, customized, mentorship), of assessment (multi-modal, formative), of governance (non-hierarchical, agentic, direct democracy), and of the larger community (as resource and object of study, parents as visiting teachers). None of this, however, grasps what I understand to be your vision of “school,” which is informed by your aionic optic. For you, as I understand it, the school is the location par excellence where *kairos*—the extraordinary moment, the emergence of something new)—the joyful epiphany that is the grand possibility inherent in the adult-child encounter, the intergenerational dialogue (Buber, 1965) called it simply “meeting”) that grounds and operationalizes what Arendt (1958) called “natality,” which is the source, exemplified in childhood, of individual and collective transformation. This is the *novum*, and one of its archetypal social structures is the *temenos*—the sacred aionic space, the place set apart—of the school we are imagining. And as we have been discussing here, power, identified by Foucault and Arendt in opposition to Power capital-t, is exercised as communication, not coercion and control: power small-t radically differs from control, domination, or violence in that it cannot be exercised over someone; it can only be exercised with others through communication and cooperation. As you have been pointing out in this conversation, the school in its

historical identity as an agent of colonization and subjection is founded on Power, and as such is a reactionary institution, in William Blake's (1966) vision a "prison built with stones of Law," in which *kronos* carves its "mind-forged manacles" on the bodies of the next generation.

The school as an aionic, kairotic institutional space is, then, an evolutionary one, the place where we practice power. As such, it becomes a political space. To inquire about that situation would take us into another discursive domain and lead us into the realm of the new (but old, really) movement that calls itself "childism." One of the organizers of this contemporary movement, John Wall (2021), has called for the institution of children's voting rights (*Give Children the Vote: On Democratizing Democracy*, and the childist narrative could logically be extended to children's educational rights, and run up against the issue of parental control of schools and by extension, of their children. In an era in which the erosion of public schooling through privatization is being pushed, in the US anyway, by monied racist and oligarchal interests, the shadow of the authoritarian *zeitgeist* that is darkening (sorry, brother!) the world right now—Power incarnate—the aionic school appears as a sanctuary, and as a space where both students and teachers are prepared for struggle against the inhuman in the space-time of infancy, of always beginning, or in your words, "space (earth), body, animals, love, plants, friendship, equality, hope, errantry, joy... questioning, listening, creating, dreaming ... among equals, in community."

Walter Kohan: Thank you for such a nice ending-beginning, brother. I really appreciate your words because you have included myself in your response, i.e. you have ended with both of us together and, in other words, we have ended together in your words. This is very nice, as a form of conversation, or communication between us, whatever the content might be. Let me, then, propose one other question: as you distinguished between two forms of power, should we distinguish between a School (with "S") and a school (with "s")? And let me invite someone else to end-begin with us. It is a promise to retake something I mentioned at the beginning of our conversation. I am referring to a Brazilian thinker who recently passed away to his ancestors. His name is Antônio Bispo dos Santos, popularly known as Nego Bispo. I met him in his house in the Quilombo (a

community of former slaves) Saco-Cortume, in São João do Piauí, located approximately 450 km from the city of Teresina, capital of the state of Piauí, in the northeast of Brazil. It was during the pandemic year of 2021, in a journey of impossible dreams I made for 110 days to celebrate Paulo Freire's 100 years old experiencing what we call "an errant and philosophical childlike pedagogy of the question."⁵ Bispo is in fact critical of Freire, and of any kind of educational institution. He defines himself as counter-colonizer (not de-colonizer); he thinks that to name (nominate, *nomear*) is to dominate (*dominar*), and that we are dominated by the colonized words we speak. Education is one of those colonialist words, and he prefers to speak of "creation." In a sense he is close to that social anarchism and exercise of power you are referring to above, and maybe this is why he came to mind after reading your recent words. Bispo is very critical of what he considers the colonizing patterns of thinking that, to use Foucault's double-sensed term, "subjects" – that is, both subjectifies and dominates us--and our institutions. One of the patterns he challenges has become very meaningful in the present historical moment, and let me share his ideas with you as a way of ending-beginning our conversation. Bispo (Santos, 2022) considers that the temporality of "beginning-middle-end" is one of those Eurocentric and colonizing patterns of thinking, whereas among indigenous and afro-Brazilian people, the pattern is "beginning-middle-beginning." This form of lived time is not intended to be an answer or an end, but rather a commitment to pluriversal and counter-hegemonic perceptions and sensibilities, not influential but confluent; not monocultural but biocultural--as ways of inhabiting our mother earth. In other words, beginning-middle-beginning is a kind of whirlwind, a circumference that puts lives in relation and organic dialogue between all forms of life – those lives that are now on danger: "... for us there is no end, we always find a way to rebegin or begin again" (Santos, 2023, p. 11). And the person saying this is someone who belong to a people that has been resisting systematic attempts at extermination (ending) for more than five centuries (Santos et al., 2025). As I understand it, time is crucial to this resistance, and I feel a movement of confluence between a childishly aionic time, like the one you have just mentioned, and this form of beginning-middle-beginning offered by Nego Bispo as ancestral

⁵ The interview was published as: Santos et al., 2025 and the story of the Journey in Kohan, 2022.

knowledge and a form of life. The denial of the end is a form of resistance to the increasingly prevalent chronological segmentary form and the result-aim oriented, pedagogical logic of productivity that comes with it and that tends to control everything everywhere, both inside and outside schools. Of course, this is just a beginning for thinking school, and how hopeful it is to feel the end of this dialogue—both for ourselves and for our readers—as a new beginning! As if we could begin and begin again, asking ourselves about our own beginning, our relationship to beginning as educators and the meaning and significance of beginning for school as *scholé*. Are we ready, dear brother, to (re)begin again (and again)?

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walter omar kohan:

Full Professor at the State University of Rio de Janeiro (Brazil). Senior Research member of National Council of Research (CNPQ) and Carlos Chagas Filho Foundation for Research Support of the State of Rio de Janeiro (FAPERJ).

david knowles kennedy:

Professor in the Department of Educational Foundations , Montclair State University. He does research in Philosophy of Childhood, Philosophy for Children, Educational Theory and Philosophy of Schooling.

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