

# THE POETRY PROJECT NEWSLETTER

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## IMPRESSIONS OF AFRICA/ GABOON

By Kenneth Koch

As in Gaboon, the white road jumps past the hospital  
Up to the sun-  
Drenched French bathing suit companies of half-  
Naked women who don't ask me along  
As if I saw the moon, entirely, one  
Body, from an air-conditioned room. The young woman speaks  
French, lying on her back, her breasts  
Bare, in the hotel pool.

The Malaria doctor. "I adore you!" Sweetness.  
Millions of pieces of junk on the street,  
And dirt. I'll take a walk.  
And now it's raining.  
Again. Jean-Guy takes me  
To the "village of sculptors" where  
I look at nothing for a while.

Tell me, the young sculptor  
Is covered with dust, Racontes-moi,  
Chef, ce que c'est que la litterature francaise?  
On en parle mais je ne comprends pas. Well, literature, I said,  
Is made up of poetry, fiction, and plays. French literature is  
all of that  
In the French language. Oh is that it? he said.  
C'est ca! Ca alors je ne savais pas!

Dust is flying everywhere  
In this half-commercial half-traditional industry  
Center, this tiny village, where, I would say,  
The heads they make are more half-bad than half-good.  
The sculptors have a careful but, finally, nonchalant  
Attitude toward what they are doing. It  
Comes out right, it comes out right. No  
Question, it seems of a "break-through,"  
Of a new artistic conception of the nature of the human head.

Preferes-tu Senghor or Cesaire? He said. Cesaire,  
I said. Ah, si. Oui. Moi aussi. He puts down his chisel. Oui  
toi tu as raison.

Negritude. A Black world. Black consciousness. What  
A splendid idea Aime Cesaire had, for writing poems  
And for breaking through the light with something to say,  
With days on the calendar, every day an estimate if right  
Or wrong the negritude and with and when, and a way of talking.

Negritude contre la fievre du monde blanc, as I take Lanaquill  
Contre le paludisme, indigenous to these parks  
And valleys that vanish as you sit in them or walk through the mirage  
Till Mama Africa becomes Boum boum boum!

The horizon's always rounder near the Equator.  
O Hotel Rapontchombo elevator  
Where I may meet the bare breasts of Gaboon!  
But I don't. I rarely leave my room  
But sit around and think of "Rapontchombo"  
What does it mean in Fang? Jean-Pierre is downstairs.  
I bang into the elevator. There's a casino

In this hotel, off-limits to the Gabonese. All the meat  
And vegetables come from France. I see an old woman,  
She looks likeable—and real. She, too, is probably imported.  
It's the sunlight of Gaboon, the horizon-rounding equator  
And the rising and sinking pontoon of the hotel elevator!

Difficult, says Jean-Pierre, to meet the *indigenes*. I don't  
Manage to do it, except for Jacques Rupombo and Helene  
Desforets, the only Gabonese novelist, who, when  
We appear together on television, shares with me the sweet oxygen  
Of the indoors functioning air-conditioning of Gaboon  
Although it is very hot under those lights she says  
Kind things. Jacques Rupombo says, "The world has need . . ."  
And other lively exaggerations, and I don't know anything  
More about the people than I did when I came in-  
To the country.

Glamorous she is, in a Gabonese manner  
But she doesn't write well, one of the Frenchmen says—  
I couldn't read her novel, my copy of it  
Falls a short, sandy, humid distance to the  
Floor of Room One Thousand and Sixty Six  
In the Hotel Rapontchombo, from where I pick it up  
Later, it may not be her fault that I can't  
Read it, there is my sleepiness, my dissatisfaction,  
My stomach trouble here in Gaboon! I still  
have read only one sentence of the book and I  
Am being picked up in five minutes by Buroombo  
To be driven to the airport. What should I do? It's  
Heavy. I carry it with me.

Today there is XY of the Embassy, his fatty rodent face  
And the dead woman he lives with and the exorbitant structures  
That constitute the Presidential palace of Bongo, Omar  
El Haij, President of Gaboon, whom the little grey French airfield  
Is keeping in power. He, being from a very small tribe,  
Not one of the big ones, can govern equably  
And keep the French language and keep calm the Fang,  
relatively speaking. A little bomb is thrown now  
And then, into the miles of avenue lizard shit in this  
Sulky "Paris by the sea" as some hit-and-run intellect described it  
To me in Paris, so I thought I would go there, come here,  
I'm not sorry I did, but it's confusing,  
As Nice would be if it were filled with lizards and all  
The food you ate and every thought you had  
Were brought in from thousands of miles away.

Madame Ounala's  
Breasts in the Rapontchombo Hotel  
And her beguiling smile  
Madame Ounala, who  
Is not half-Christian and half-Jew  
But half-French and half-Gabonese  
Whose beauty makes my knees  
Shiver of the Rapontchombo Hotel  
Desk area quiver a white set  
Cushion's inviting  
Over there somebody sits  
On it gives me the key  
To my "deposit box" (*depot*). Her dress, upper  
Dress, moves, as it

Comes only with such swelling breasts  
To move—I will never get this woman to my bed.  
Perhaps I can manage to have her speak to me  
In a somewhat less impersonal way.

A man in a big suit comes to see Madama Ounala  
And he must be her husband or her lover with a stolen  
Happiness right in the middle of his life  
While the sea birds are watching, in Gaboon.

The French in Gaboon, in Saint  
Louis, deliberately created  
A future native ruling class, as  
Follows: the French men married  
Gabonese women. The half-  
French half-Gabonese children  
Were to rule and be happy in Gaboon  
But things turned out differently.

At the university, Madam Hua informs me,  
It's the country kids who write the best French,  
The children from the bush. All of one tribe  
In the village, they speak the language of the tribe, and French  
Is only for school. In Libreville, however,  
Of different tribes, they have to speak French  
Or not speak at all, and  
It is imperfect, of course, full of errors, and not pure.

The Mvett's a Gaboon (Fang) oral epic written down in French  
And the best of Gaboon literature, if the very central essence  
of Gaboon  
Is what you're after, it's what I'm after, I read the Mvett  
Which is full of exclamation, singing, and exaggeration.  
The hero sets out to destroy all the iron on the earth  
Because iron is the cause of all sorrow—discord, war, and death.

The two members of the "Party," wearing Omar Bongo shirts,  
Looked neither humorous nor arty, and that they were flirts  
Wasn't something anyone would think of. For them, life's just desserts  
It seemed were their ongoing roles in the National Party  
Enclosing all beauty, strength, ideas, everything that's best.

They abjure the Gabonese people to work hard each day.  
"It is as a bird that is fallen from the mother bird's nest  
When one of you does not," says Thin Sad Eye, while Big Fat  
Guy spears at his notes, and says: "Each day that you don't  
Work for Gaboon it is like a wound that you are giving to your  
country's body."

His card  
Is crammed  
With honorific  
Titles  
And achievements  
So one can know  
Of all the ways  
He is of note.

Light flashes on palm trees  
Mosquitoes go around  
Toward the casino.  
His name was not  
Omar until his conversion to  
Islam a short time ago.

We live only for our vacations, said the Cooperant, co-operator,  
And four of them said they would phone me in Paris and didn't.  
They live at the University,  
How end, how start! And there are just no books  
Says the Prof. de la Literature Americaine. He reads to his students  
out loud  
Their favorite American writer is Ambrose Bierce.

You have made me, the man in the beard said, vibrate!  
I once wrote poems. Then I stopped. To hear  
Those poems you read, he said, though, made me vibrate

Again and I wished to write again, which I may, and vibrate.  
Trans.: Tu m'as fair vibrer. The driveway stone-white in the  
tropical flat car skimmed  
To a stop. Heavy the heat fell over the  
Ocean, even. A jar could have held all our thoughts.

I sit what seems forever in this room  
Thinking over and over, I am in Gaboon.  
The ocean out there is dark.  
I feel imprisoned, as in a Noah's Ark  
Of which I'm the poetical baboon.

France is still here. Here's their  
military airport. They keep  
Bongo in power, I hear,  
To prevent the accession of the Fang  
Who'd stamp their language on the land of Gaboon  
And zap the leaders of the other tribes, and bang!  
The French might be out the door, the  
French language out the door, but this  
Is extraordinarily unlikely  
Since there is uranium in Gaboon.

Yes there's a kind of nulness  
A superficial supernatural dulness  
A nothing no-place-ness of which I am acquiring a sense  
Here in Gab-, Gab-, Gab-, Gabon, Gaboon.

Better it should happen here than someplace else  
Where everything always meant something  
The shock (renewed) and being sick. Nulness.  
Ahead lies the Heart of Africa, and the East  
Of Africa, island with animals, and the doubleton  
Of the Pacific, Madagascar, the "Sea Eater."

The stirring  
Dust makes  
Lizards jump a  
Wave comes  
In from above  
Rapont  
Chombo place the  
Forest is two  
Kilometres away  
Face there isn't any  
Stomachache Pchombo  
Rap on, rap on  
All the day Tchombo  
Engong did away  
With the bad parts  
Of Ndoumou Obame  
His too much power until  
At the end a  
Swallow flew out of his  
Nostril and flew by  
The People  
In the separate  
Villages a great bright  
Light engulfed the earth and  
No one could see.

There are forty-seven languages in Gaboon!  
Or forty-eight. And it was here that Dr. Schweitzer worked in his  
hospital  
On steaming-horrid summer days chasing the microbes none too soon  
From the fever-battered bodies of the Fang and other tribes of Gaboon.  
His hospital is along way  
From Libreville. Saint Louis  
Was the capital before that, and before that,  
Before the colonists, there was not even any conception  
Of a capital of Gaboon.  
People fled from the north, and the east, arriving  
The bush, to eat animals, manioc, and each other—the  
Fang are cannibals—were. There was only forest then. At Lambarene,  
Where, after, the hospital was, the Effik and Bubu were treated,  
And later M'Pongwe and Fang.

*Kenneth Koch's Selected Poems were published by Vintage Press in March  
1985.*

# Edmond Jabes: Exile and the Sacred

The demands put upon the poet have never been easy to fulfill. For semiotician Roland Barthes, poetry functions as "a kind of sacred relish" upon the Text of the World. Paul Valéry declared that the "chief ambition of every poet is to leave his nation's language a little richer... a little better known in its resources than it was at the beginning of his career." Neo-Marxist critic Hans Magnus Enzensburger, in his essay *Poetry & Politics*, staked out the following regions for poetry: "Poetry must be more incorrupt than ever in insisting on its birthright against all domination."

The pronouncements above make for some heavy rocks to lug around when one is weighing the immediacy of paying the rent against an already overdue phone bill. And the load of stones gets more cumbersome if you stop to consider that the sale of poetry books in the U.S. averages about 130,000 volumes a year; that the doyens who select "what's best" for the reading public chose Carolyn Kizer over Robert Duncan for this year's Pulitzer Prize, while ignoring 1984's two major literary events, Robert Creeley's *Collected Poems* & the definitive edition of Olson's *Maximus Poems*, from any Pulitzer consideration.

In this Post-Culture (George Steiner's apt phrase), poetry is the most fragile of arts. "Poetry is always a dying language but never a dead language" (Robert Smithson): is this Hope or evidence of a present state of exhaustion? The industrialization of the mind & the cheapening of language with the vocabulary of consumption has left little of what we once called the "sacred" untouched. Inner lives are shaped by the fixed imagery of rock-videos & ads that sell yogurt with the slogan "The Taste of Freedom."

The doleful outlook of our political and cultural futures seems to defy any simple solutions. But like the World War Two GI, his backpack sure to include a Bible along with K-rations, those of us sloughing through the computerized wilderness need our own version of a survival kit to keep us from taking the headlines too seriously.

Edmond Jabes' *Book of Questions*, its seven volumes finally available in English in Rosemarie Waldrop's excellent translations from the French, is, perhaps, one of the most vital & needed texts to reach our shores in a long while. The *Book of Questions* is the most far-reaching & vital meditation upon the acts of reading & writing of our times. Intertwined with this meditation upon the text are moving meditations upon Jewishness, the Holocaust, exile, the Book—of saying what is unsayable, ineffable—the circular return to the World/Text, to the mirror of Reading/Writing, Homeland.

The *Book of Questions* is unprecedented in its fusions of forms and strategies towards the making of meaning. Deconstructionist Jacques Derrida, in a much-quoted statement, commented that "in the last ten years nothing of interest has been written in France that does not have its precedent somewhere in a text of Jabes." Arriving late into an empty space, *The Book of Questions* entered into the discourse of textuality, absence and exile that has dominated French intellectual thought since the end of World War Two.

You are a true writer. Your anxiety  
is a sister to mine. Our doubts torture  
us in the womb of the same words.

—Reb Madela  
(Return to the Book, p. 195)

Edmond Jabes was born in 1912, the son of a wealthy Egyptian-Jewish family, and grew up in the French-speaking community of Cairo. Attending college in Paris, he established literary friendships with Paul Eluard, Rene Char and Max Jacob. He returned to Egypt, serving with the British Army in Palestine. After the war, he began to publish his poetry through Paris & Cairo publishing houses. Although he was widely respected as a poet, his residence outside of France limited his audience.

Jabes' comfortable life was radically altered by the Suez crisis of 1956. Raised in a nominally Jewish atmosphere, Jabes found himself persecuted because of that nominal affiliation. Along with the rest of the Egyptian-Jewish community, he found himself stripped of home, his money & his Egyptian citizenship.

Jabes chose to relocate in Paris, capital of his literary tongue. He continued writing, mostly on the Metro while commuting to and from his job. His experience of Exile, of being an Exile, of confronting his previously submerged Jewishness, was the rhizomatic thrust for the writings that would occupy him for over a decade. Jabes told Paul Auster in an interview "... the fact of suddenly having to live a condition, the condition of being Jewish, changed things for me. I was faced by new problems, and this led to a completely new kind of questioning for me. In some sense this was the origin of the series of the books that followed."

The "new problems" and "new questions" of Jabes led to his close reading of the Diasporic writings of Judaism: Talmud, Midrash, Zohar & the manifold Kabbalistic texts. These writings reveal that difficult marriage of the Jewish people and The Book—The Book that forged a scattered tribe into a people, the Book that made possible a community's survival under the cruelest of situations.

Every language has its own silence.

—Elias Canetti

When I begin to write after a rather long interval, I draw the words as if out of empty air. If I capture one, then I have just this one alone and all the toil must begin anew.

—Franz Kafka (Diary Entry)

The first three books of *The Book of Questions: The Book of Questions, The Book of Yudel & Return of The Book*, form a sustained meditation on the Holocaust & Judaism whose only equal is in the cryptic oeuvre of Paul Celan. Sarah and Yudel, the two characters who reappear throughout the trilogy, are adolescent lovers who are deported into the twilight of the Nazi death camps. Upon her return from the camps, Sarah goes mad, to die years later in a psychiatric institute. Yudel returns in *The Book of Yudel* as author of *The Book of Questions*; he later becomes a suicide. This story is told and retold, through the agencies of centuries talking to one another through the vehicles of aphorisms, poetry, prose, dialog, letters and questions. Throughout these three wings, the text is constantly being commented upon by imaginary rabbis, who seem to guide and support the work in its quest for The Book.

The story of Sarah and Yudel is the account, through various dialogues and meditations attributed to imaginary rabbis, of a love destroyed by men and words. It has the dimensions of the book and the bitter stubbornness of a wondering question.

—BQ, p. 26

Our memory survives destruction in the universal memory so that the future is nothing but a regrouping of God's memories which man takes on himself.

—BY, p. 134

Man does not exist. God does not exist. The world alone exists through God and man in the open book.

—RB, p. 236

Jabes' textual antecedents are rooted in the Talmud, a compilation of rabbinical debate, interpretation, commentary and amplification of the Bible and Jewish Law. This 2 1/2 million word work is, according to scholar Jacob Neusner, "a literary form quite without parallel in world literature." The rabbinical discourse exists in timeless time—sacred time—rabbis arguing across centuries & the text is liberally mixed with parable, folklore, medical advice, liturgy and philosophy. The rabbis of the Talmud saw the everyday as holy and were practical mystics whose "chief rite was argument." (Neusner).

Jabes takes this framework to deliver a secular yet holy discourse: the sacred quality of the act of writing.

Writing a poem has always been a religious act for me. I have tried to be the word of the book, for the past and future of the book.

—BY, p. 134

Every work cancels the dark. Every work is a hymn from the other side of memory to a memory that is spellbound.

—RB, p. 160

The pre-eminence of The Book is evident in normative, non-esoteric, Jewish thought. "Of the making of books, there is no end," said Koheleth in Ecclesiastes. "A book should not be used as a missile, shield or an object used for punishment" advised Rabbi Judah of Regensburg. An entry found in the minutes of the Latvian Jewish Community Council (1736): "Those who refuse to lend their books... shall be fined." If you accidentally drop a sacred text, it is customary to kiss the book after you pick it up. Worn-out Torah scrolls and prayer books are never thrown out—they are buried within a Jewish cemetery.

The Kabbalists, who had such a profound influence on Jabes, extended the sacredness of the Book into language itself. To the Kabbalists, the Torah is an all-encompassing text, created by God before God created the world, written in God's language—Hebrew. The Torah, as interpreted by the Kabbalists, was but a series of divine names, whose hidden structure was the structure of the world. Some Kabbalists went as far as claiming that there existed a separate Torah for every person—a Torah with "a face" on it. Gershom Scholem, the greatest of all scholars of Jewish mysticism, sums up the Kabbalists' attitude towards language:

Language in its purest form, that is, Hebrew, according to the Kabbalists, reflects the fundamental spiritual nature of the world; in other words, it has a mystical value. Speech reaches God because it comes from God. Man's common language, whose prima facie function, indeed, is only of an intellectual nature, reflects the creative language of God.

—G. Scholem

Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism, p. 17

The beginning of the book is a beginning for beings and things. All writing invites to an anterior reading of the world which the word urges and which we pursue to the limits of faded memory. We can only write what we have been able to read. It is an infinitesimal part of the universe to be told. The book never actually surrenders.

—Elya, p. 150

To be Jewish is to have left home early and arrived nowhere.

—Elya, p. 101

To fragment the name of God, which formed of all the words in the language, to reduce it to a single word, single syllable, single letter. So, at the end of the night, we approached the alphabet.

—Elya, p. 57

"*The Book of Questions* is based on the idea that we all live with words that obsess us," Jabes told Paul Auster. There remain four wings of his world—*Yael, Elya, Aely, & El*—continue his personal obsessions with the words, "God," "The Book," "Writing" and "Death." Yael, the woman, becomes allegory for the Word; the relation between the narrator and his love Yael mirroring that of the writer and the word.

There is an impassable space between writer and the book which the readers are called on to fill. This is why the act of writing is so painful. It does not save a man, it throws him back into the void.

Only man can do something for man.

—Yael, p. 25

The product of this relationship, Elya, is stillborn—the silence between writing. "Silence, like the writer, knows the anguish of the word which will break it with cruel love" (Elya, p. 126). The narrator continues his search for his truth through the word, only to find, as all writers do, that words always work to change the writer, Otherhood. "Between the word heard and the word to be said, is this half-silence which is the last refuge of the echo, there is my place." *El, Or The Last Book*, the final wing in *The Book of Questions*, is at once a recapitulation and a renewal of the mesh that Jabes has worked so carefully through the six previous wings.

Writing: A graphic representation, an obsessive fresco on the walls of a book which has been protected so long that, no sooner opened than it is corroded and destroyed by the air rushing in.

... All writing returns the word to its initial transparency.

—El, p. 23

Jabes ends his work within the most noisome of silences, the silences of interruption, rather than the silence of completion. The great silence one hears after the cessation of a particularly sublime work of music.

The question of the universe is a question delivered of the book.

The essential: in the throes of our crisis, to preserve the question.

—El, p. 104

Although Jabes' thought reaches into the regions inhabited by many forms of questioning—of God, of Silence, of the Holocaust, of Absence—his deep meditation upon the acts of writing touch me as no other writer who speaks of that mirrored subject.

Unlike the Deconstructionist critics, who have championed him in the U.S. & France, Jabes' work is not mere academic razzle-dazzle or intellectual one-upmanship. "Those who associate any part of the *Book of Questions* theory of literature are greatly mistaken," he states in the *Book of Resemblances*, a more recent work. Jabes' work is imbued with a sense of the sacred, not in the manner of Heidegger's "singing... to the trace of the fugitive gods," but in the manner of the rabbis who inhabit the *Book of Questions*; that is, wonder tempered by the reality of existence.

It may be that Jewish survival, in the face of constant anti-Semitism & perpetual Otherness, is due to the presence of The Book. The nomadic ancient Israelites carried The Book with them in their wanderings as their monument, repudiating idols. Through centuries, rabbis and ordinary Jews delved into the unfolding Torah, drinking in Texts that can never be fully elucidated. And from that eternal tension between knowing and unknown, "there is room for dream" (Olivier Reuvalt D'Allones). Dreamtime is writing, hope in a world that offers so little in the way of dream or hope.

Jabes' *Book of Questions* is a refutation of Adorno's prohibition on post-Auschwitz poetry. In an odd way, we are condemned to keep writing, rather than the relief of going silent. In this America, which debases anything of value and commodifies all our private utopias, Jabes is needed as an antidote to the Simulacra that engulf us. Too many writers have fallen into a silence generated by money's absence and the promise of words betrayed. Only when I write comes the Utopia that Walter Benjamin speaks of: "... a cloudless realm of perfect goods on which no money falls."

By Joel Lewis



# OCTOBER: THE POETRY

SAINT MARK'S CHURCH 2ND. AVENUE & 10TH STREET

Wednesday Night Reading Series \$3

- Oct. 2 George-Therese Dickenson, David Rattray &
- Oct. 9 Jayne Cortez / Ted Joans
- Oct. 16 Paul Violi / Barry Yourgrau
- Oct. 23 Kenneth Koch / Maureen Owen
- Oct. 30 Judy Grahn

Monday Night Poetry & Performance Series

- Oct. 7 Constance DeJong / Susan Kouguell
- Oct. 14 Allen Frame / Jane Warrick
- Oct. 21 John Bernd / Peter Rose
- Oct. 28 OPEN MONDAY: Performances & Poetry

St. Mark's Talks \$3 8PM.

- Oct. 27 Judy Grahn

St. Mark's Plays Hosted By Elenor Nauen

- Oct. 26 Short Plays By Frank O'Hara & William Carlos Williams

Workshops with Susie Timmons Tuesday  
James Sherry Fridays

Master Class with Alice Notley Saturday



## This Month's Events



October 2: **George Therese-Dickenson, David Ratray & John Wieners.** George Therese-Dickenson, poet & teacher, author of *Striations* (Good Gay Poets, 1976); *Transducing* (Segue, forthcoming this winter). Cofounder of Incisions Arts which conducts workshops in prisons. **David Ratray**, poet and translator, author of *A Red-Framed Print of the Summer Palace* (Vincent Fitz Gerald, NYC, 1983). His translations of Artaud are found in the *Artaud Anthology*, ed. by Jack Hirschman for City Lights. His translation of the novel, *Difficult Death* by Rene Crevel is forthcoming from North Point Press. **John Wieners**, author of *The Hotel Wentley Poems, Ace of Pentacles, Asylum Poems & Behind the State Capitol of Cincinnati Pike*. He stopped writing in 1976 and only began to do so again in 1983. His *New & Selected Poems* are forthcoming from Black Sparrow Press. He received a 1985-1986 Guggenheim Fellowship.

October 7: **To Be Announced.**

October 9: **Jayne Cortez & Ted Joans.** Jayne Cortez, critically acclaimed black poet. Author of 6 books, including *Firespitter* (Bola Press, 1982), *Mouth On Paper* (Bola Press, 1977) & *Coagulations: New & Selected Poems* (Thunders Mouth Press, 1984). She has recorded her poetry & collaborated with well-known jazz musicians on three separate records, including the classic *Celebrations & Solitudes* (Strata-East Records, 1975). Her poems, translations & reviews have appeared in numerous anthologies & little magazines, including *Confirmation* (Quill, NYC, 1983), *Homage a Leon Gontran Damas* (Presence Africaine, Paris, 1979), *The Black Scholar, Feminist Studies & Nimrod*. **Ted Joans**, poet, painter & literary legend. Joans began as an artist, came to NYC in the early 50's where he met such jazz greats as Charlie Parker & Miles Davis. Lived in the Village & began writing his poetry & taking a major part in the beat life. Author of several books of poetry, including *Afrodisia*. Joans makes his home in Paris & Timbuktu.

October 14: **Allen Frame & Jane Warrick.** Allen Frame is a photographer, actor & theater director from Mississippi. In September, he directed the play *Showmanship* at BACA & he had a one-man show of his work at Christminster Gallery last spring. He has assembled an unusual slide documentary interweaving his own family photographs with a text drawn from letters of women in his family. The presentation is a compelling & personal portrait of a southern family; a spirited matriarchy spanning four generations. **Jane Warrick** is an English writer & visual artist. Her experimental narrative makes use of photographs & theatrical dialogues. A radical feminist, she has been published in *Wedge & Bomb*.

October 16: **Paul Violi & Barry Yourgrau.** Paul Violi, a native New Yorker & the author of three books of poetry, including the critically acclaimed *Spurge* (Sun Press, 1981). Former interim Director of the Poetry Project. Has taught at several colleges & received literary awards. **Barry Yourgrau**, author of several books including, *The Sadness of Sex & A Man Jumps Out of an Airplane*—a collection of his stories published by Sun Press. His stories & his prose poems have appeared in the *Paris Review*, the *New York Times*, the *East Village Eye & Bomb*.

October 21: **John Bernd & Peter Rose.** John Bernd is a performer & dancer whose solo work, group works, collaborations & appearances in other artists' works have made him familiar to New York audiences. There is an engaging immediacy in his performances. Last summer he was seen at Art on the Beach & P.S. 122, & this winter, Danspace will present his "Lost & Found (scenes from a life) part 3." **Peter Rose** is a well-known performer in New York. A 1984 CAPS recipient, trained with Grotowski's Polish Laboratory Theater, Rose's story-telling, hyperkinetic dance, & music in the "Over the Wall Stories" attracted sold-out houses & critical acclaim during a recent tour of West Germany. His new work for the 1985-1986 season is "Diamond Fever," the story of two altruistic lawyers whose good intentions are stymied by their obsession with the diamond.

October 23: **Kenneth Koch & Maureen Owen.** Kenneth Koch: poet, playwright & teacher. *Selected Poems 1950-1982* (Random House, 1985). Teaches at Columbia University & is the author of several other books including *On The Edge, The Duplications & The Art of Love*, which sparked much controversy. Noted for his pioneer work in the teaching of poetry to children & the elderly, it was Koch who began the Poets in the Schools movement. **Maureen Owen** has been noted for her "raucous lyricism." Her seductive poetry entices a growing audience. Author of several books, including *Hearst in Space* & her latest effort, *Amelia Earhart* (Vortex, 1984). She is the former Poetry Project Program Coordinator & editor of *Telephone* magazine, which published 19 issues. She currently publishes Telephone Books Press.

October 26: *Saturday Night Play Series* hosted by Elinor Nauen. *The Short Plays of Frank O'Hara & William Carlos Williams*.

October 28: **Constance DeJong & Susan Kouguell.** Constance DeJong is the critically acclaimed author of such works as *Modern Love & The Lucy Amarillo Stories*. In collaboration with composer Phillip Glass, DeJong wrote the vocal text & libretto for the opera *Satyagraha: M.K. Gandhi in South Africa*. She has presented spoken adaptations of her written texts to audiences throughout the U.S., Europe & Canada. **Susan Kouguell**, a poet & filmmaker has produced performance poetry written for a group of actors & singers including: Kelley Hinman, Susan McDonald & Billy Scheffer. She has collaborated with Ernest Marrero on six films screened throughout the U.S. & Europe, receiving awards from the Marburg Film Festival in Germany & grants from the Jerome Foundation & CAPS.

October 30: **Judy Grahn** has published two books of criticism, *The Highest Apple: Sappho & the Lesbian Poetic Tradition* (Spinster's Ink & Another Mother Tongue: Gay Words, Gay Worlds (Beacon Press). Her most recent collection of poetry is *Work of a Common Woman* (Crossing Press) which includes selections from *The Common Woman Poems, A Woman Is Talking To Death & She Who*. Judy Grahn teaches at Stanford University & the New College of California.

### St. Mark's Talks

St. Mark's Talks (selected Sundays in the Parish Hall at 8pm)

October 27: **Judy Grahn**, "The Lesbian Poetic Tradition from Sappho to Now." Opening November 24, "Subject Matter" with Lydia Davis, Robert Gluck & Nick Piombino; January 26 Lorenzo Thomas.

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**Manuscript Deadline** For David Bromige Issue of *The Difficulties* is December 15, 1985. SEE recent Silliman Issue for ideas of format. Inquiries to: Tom Beckett/ 1695 Brady Lake Rd./ Kent, Ohio 44240.

### BOOKS RECEIVED

*Broke Aid* by Gail Sher & *A Little Hawaii Diary* by Kit Robinson published by tramen, 369 Green Street, San Francisco, Ca 94133.

*Third Congress* by Paul Dixon published by 21st Sensualist Press, Rochester, N.Y.

*The Raft* by Kathy Fagan. The National Poetry Series selected by Daniel Halpern, published by E.P. Dutton, N.Y.

*Surprise Surprise Surprise That's Not My Finger* by Maria Mancini, edited by Maggie Dubris & Elinor Nauen. A xeroxed candy bowl of iconoclasm. \$3.00

*Greasy Lake & Other Stories* by T. Coraghessan Boyle published by Viking. \$16.95.

*Clarissa Street Project Be-Bop Edition* by Bobby Johnson, Rochester, New York.

*Without Warning* by Charlotte Declue, published by Strawberry Press, P.O. Box 451 Bowling Green Station, N.Y., N.Y. 10004.

*Pound/Lewis, The Letters of Ezra Pound & Wyndham Lewis*, edited by Timothy Materer, New Directions, 80 Eighth Avenue, N. Y., N.Y. 10011. \$37.50 cloth.

*Antipodes Jane* by Barbara Ker Wilson, Viking Books.

*Sophokles/Women of Trachis, A Version* by Ezra Pound, New Directions, 80 Eighth Avenue, N.Y., N.Y. 10011. \$6.95.

*The Vulgar Streak* by Wyndham Lewis, Black Sparrow Press, P.O. Box 3993, Santa Barbara, California. \$12.50 paper, \$20.00 cloth.

*The Rolando Hinojosa Reader*, edited by Jose David Saldivar, An Arte Publico Press Book, Houston, Tx.

*Invention* by Anne Waldman with drawings by Susan Hall, The Kulchur Foundation, 888 Park Avenue, N.Y., N.Y. 10021.

*Ovals* by George Tysh, published by In Camera, Detroit, Michigan.

*Autumn Sleep & Roots in Winter; Uncollected Haiku* by Lee J. Richmond, Pearl Paul Ltd., N.Y., N.Y. 10012.

*A Day At The Beach* by Robert Grenier, Roof Books published by the Segue Foundation, 300 Bowery, N.Y. N.Y. 10012. \$6.00.

*A Transparent Tree: Fictions* by Robert Kelly, McPherson & Co., P.O. Box 638, New Paltz, New York. \$10.00.

*Celso* by Leo Romero, Arte Publico Press, Houston, Tx. \$7.00.

### Magazines Received

*ZZZZYVA*, Vol. 1 #2; *the last word: west coast writers & artists*, published by Zzyzyva Inc., 55 Sutter St., Suite 400, San Francisco, Ca. 94104. \$5.00.

*Open Places: Humor In America 38 & 39*, includes Clark, Kizer, Owen, Ostriker, Jordan, Bell, Kostelanetz, Sklar, Dillard, Simic, & many, many, many more. Editor, Eleanor Bender, Stephens College, Columbia, Missouri. \$10.00.

*Puerto Del Sol*, Volume 21, #1, English Dept. of New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, New Mexico 88003. \$3.00.

*Relations*, Spring 85 #1, this magazine translated entirely into English, attempts to bring Serbo Croatian poetry & prose to the West from Belgrade. Published by The Association of Serbian Writers, Francuska 7, 11,000 Beograd, Yugoslavia.

*Yellow Silk; Journal of Erotic Arts*, #15, P.O. Box 6374, Albany, Ca. 94706. \$3.00.

*Blue Smoke* #3, Brodey, Mac Low, Warsh, Mayer, Sanders, Savage & More, edited by Bill deNoyelles & Phil Good, 58 Fairview Avenue, Park Ridge, N.J. 07656.

*ISSUE, A Journal Of The Arts*, no nonsense essays on art, visual & sculptural. P.O. Box 122, Prince Street Station, N.Y., N.Y. 10012.

*The Paris Review* #95, Barth, Meredith, Hacker, Breton & etc., 45-39 171 Place, Flushing, N.Y. 11358. \$5.00.

*ACM* #12, Acevedo, Rojas, Dunsmore, Eshleman, Equi & etc. Thunder Mouth's Press, Box 11233, Chicago, Il. 60611. \$5.00.

*The World* #41, Notley, Scholnick, Schiff, Bye, Swartz, Bernstein, Nauen, Waldman, Lenhart, Myles, Kraut etc etc. Guest Editor: Cliff Fyman. The Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church, 10th Street & 2nd Avenue, N.Y., N.Y.

### TO ALL SONGWRITERS

Talent Collaborators is in the process of compiling a new songbook. The book will be promoted & distributed to singers, musicians, producers & agents. We intend to sell your song. There's no charge if your song is accepted. We take all types of songs, but will only consider those songs which include a TAPE, LEADSHEET, & LYRICS. Songs accompanied by an S.A.S.E. will be returned if not accepted. We receive an agent's fee of 25% for all songs we sell; this includes selling price & royalties. You will receive one free book immediately. If your song is accepted, a contract will be sent to you. We will not publish any song without a signed contract. Songs must be original & should be copyrighted. SEND ALL SONGS, TAPES, & LEADSHEETS to: TALENT COLLABORATORS/ 27799 S.W. 140th Avenue/ Naranja Lakes/ Florida 33032.

# LETTERS



Illustration by Denise Barbieri

Dear Editor

I was a bit puzzled by Alicia Ostriker's "What Do Women (Poets) Want?" for it was difficult to determine whether she believes the models exist or whether women poets are in search of same. Regarding the three linked qualities she says women poets need, it seems we already have models who have "mastered and contained the past and speak in their own voices and yet with the voice of the age" i.e. Emily Dickinson, Dorothy Parker, Gertrude Stein, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Sylvia Plath & Anne Sexton. Certainly four of the above also constitute a critique of culture in their poetry and the now practicing modern women poets also fit the third quality of alternative vision as do the earlier aforementioned models.

I really don't think it's that difficult to discover who our mothers are as male poets have no difficulty identifying who their fathers are. Besides, one should never be influenced by critics, men or women. (I never am!) One should always go to the source to determine its worth.

The essay sounds very much like her volume *Writing Like a Woman* (U of Michigan Press '83)—confused criticism. Her last paragraph in that text concludes: "As for women writers, I believe the stronger and more free they are, the more they will, for the time being, write like women; and the more they write like women, the stronger they will become."

Somewhat ridiculous and perhaps a bit sexist. A writer should write—period! Only a strong and free person can write, in the first or last place, and that then reveals the person is balanced yin/yang or not. Who cares! Personally, I think what women poets want and need are fewer critics and more publishers interested in printing their work!

Rochelle Lynn Holt

Dear Editor:

Tim Dlugos' article "Poetry, Politics & Propaganda" deserves serious response. As publisher of *TOMORROW TRIUMPHANT: Selected Poems of Otto Rene Castillo*, I hope you'll allow me comment in your pages.

To support his case that "propaganda" is antithetical to poetry, Dlugos points to what he sees as propagandistic lapses in Castillo's work, and praises by contrast the poetry of Cuban exile Reinaldo Arenas. From this, he extrapolates a model for poetry which, in its generality, will be agreeable to many North American writers among whom there is a relatively weak tradition of political engagement.

Castillo, executed at 31, was not equally successful in all his poems. Neither the translators nor I felt anything less than a representative selection was called for, because Castillo's poetry works importantly on a documentary level. Some of the poems are too romantic, a few too rhetorical and not concrete enough. While emphasizing such examples to build a case against "propaganda," Dlugos does grant that Castillo, "in his best poetry" manages to "meld his political vision into a poetry at once tender, extravagant and clear." If this last is true—and I believe it is—we must consider it a major achievement. And there are enough poems of such power—at once profoundly political and spiritual—that one must question Dlugos' emphasis.

Dlugos ill prepares himself to assess Castillo's work when he dismisses the truth of history from the essence of the poem. Dlugos wants to examine the beast, but in his laboratory rather than in the beast's native habitat. That habitat is a physical and social environment requiring psychological adaptation which in its most conscious form is called moral choice. In terms of the habitat itself—the concrete "now" of history—it is a question of historic choice.

Castillo came of age at the moment his country's best hope for a more just society was overturned by its historic oppressors and plunged again into brutal repression. For him to have chosen to fight, not only as a man but as a poet, on the side of the oppressed and to have produced a body of poetry that accurately records all the stresses and exhilarations of that choice, is an extraordinary thing. This fundamental choice—choice for a concrete and not an abstract freedom and including a craft shaped by struggle—is what gives Castillo's poetry resonance beyond the borders of his own "sweet country." By dismissing the truth of history, Dlugos not only turns a blind eye on Castillo, he denies poetry an element essential to understanding the "what is happening here and now." It is Dlugos' line of thought which begins to suggest "constraints" and "a doc-

trinaire and hidden agenda." Dlugos should have noticed that in Castillo the agenda is never hidden.)

What exactly is Dlugos arguing against and what for? He builds his case on imprecise abstractions. He is certainly against "Propaganda" without defining it because it "rots the truth of the poem" and "yokes the language." He is equally imprecise about what he is defending: poetry is "art made of language" which has the virtue of sound common sense if it didn't lead to further circular abstractions. Poetry is "true" because it "turns language into art," its "essence is beauty," "poetry sets (language) free to be more than a beast of burden." Though these are formulas we are conditioned to accept as universal truths, they are really rhetoric in the field of aesthetics. Dlugos also says that a political "yes" is, "at its best, an affirmation of the value of human experience." But what values of what experience? That's the whole crux of the problem, isn't it? Like anyone, a poet must not be just for "Truth" but must say what is true and what false, even as he or she knows there is no perfect manifestation of truth. But that is where history makes all the difference. If one wrote a poem about the Nazi extermination of 6 million Jews, and said that Nazi doctrine was an evil lie, and that the Jews of the Holocaust had truth on their side—one would be engaging in propaganda.

Because that's what propaganda is: "the spreading of ideas, information or rumor for the purpose of helping or injuring an institution, a cause, or a person" (Webster's Seventh). Dlugos may have a general idea that propaganda is *per se* false, but that is not the definition it has in our language. I would say, using its real definition, that the heart of propaganda is what I have called *historic choice*.

If Dlugos, in objecting to "propaganda," is actually objecting to false information and ideas, or rumors, then I certainly agree though I think he has no case against Castillo on these grounds. But if Dlugos is objecting at bottom to historic choice on the part of the poet, or to a choice that includes the collectivity of people in struggle, and to the disciplining of poetic craft to that choice, then I must disagree. It is precisely the absence of historic choice which makes so much of our poetry anemic and fogged-in with inconsequential "subjective truths." And it must be said that authentic poetic imagination is not a license for self-serving illusions.

The most curious thing about Dlugos' line is that the verses of Reinaldo Arenas that Dlugos quotes so approvingly are full of propaganda whose truth is questionable. His description of Castro as "the Great Chief, the one who now wears a beard/and is surrounded by automatic rifles" is hardly stunning poetry and as propaganda sounds as if rewritten from *Time* magazine. When Dlugos agrees with such sweeping characterizations as "the desperate crackling in the land...where millions of slaves...scratch the earth with no meaning," I have to ask on what Dlugos bases his approval? Does Arenas have "poetic omniscience"? Does Dlugos have detailed knowledge of Cuban history and the Cuban Revolution? Did he see more than one film made by Cuban exiles? Evaluating any society is a complex task and there is simply too much evidence and testimony contradicting Arenas to swallow his subjective and necessarily prejudiced characterizations whole. I have to ask why Dlugos does so. When Arenas writes that Cubans have "the right to applaud or die riddled with bullets," we are in the province of rumor and outright falsehood. I, for one, cannot find any evidence from independent sources as Amnesty International to support such a serious allegation. Arenas, himself conspicuously unriddled by bullets, has his reasons for opposing the Cuban Revolution but his propaganda, at best, is a form of special pleading: "misleading argument that presents one point or phase as it covered the entire question."

At the heart of Arenas' propaganda is the contention that the Revolution made no difference for the better in Cuban life—those revolutions never do. It is a charge hurled at every real social revolution that occurs and is one of the Right's most serviceable bits of propaganda—it sounds so non-partisan. It is always popular up here because it gets one off the hook quite nicely. As specifically regards Cuba, the idea is ridiculous. Cuba is not paradise, but the tremendous social and economic advances made by the Cuban people since the Revolution have been too well documented to let this shibboleth about revolutions stand. I find the idea, in both Arenas' poetry and Dlugos' article, to have exactly the character of "doctrinaire claptrap."

But why is Dlugos so ready to accept such outrageous propaganda, and at the same time find such objection to Castillo's hope for a "collective smile" for the children at the end of the century? I know many of our artists are driven up the wall by any mention of a collective dimension. Their identities are shaped by their social alienation. They want to place all truth in the individual, and poetry, above all, is to be based on "individual truth." I understand the enormous appeal of these ideas. They are the propaganda of all my schooldays. But it doesn't take a genius to grasp that one's historical condition is not identical to the universal condition. More difficult is the realization that the universal qualities of one's own aesthetic tradition are not really universal, and are already ceasing to be dominant.

It is time to challenge the defenders of "individuality" because so often the individuality they are defending is a shrunken one. It is an individuality equated almost entirely with subjectivity. It is an individuality that shrinks from human history, that is threatened and not enlarged by choice, that manages an ironic distance and wants to call it mystical detachment. It is a weak and self-centered individuality that identifies freedom with non-action and that seeks in art not a means to,

but an escape from, life.

And, as if to illustrate, really to the point of parody, we get Bill Zavatsky's poem, "Reading Roque Dalton, Smoking a Nicaraguan Cigar." Dlugos' article deserved better illustration. This poem is truly awful in its puerile manderings about the poet's subjective sensibilities. For Zavatsky, his subjectivity really is the beginning and end of poetic imagination, and he seems quite pleased to be otherwise a know-nothing.

When will we get poets with the strength "to pound the table with love" as Neruda had it, or poets "with a duty to find, and rough reality to embrace" as Rimbaud predicted? Probably not until crisis has cornered us and a choice has to be made. That choice will be an intensely personal and thoroughly collective one.

Robert Anbian

## TIM DLUGOS RESPONDS:

I am grateful to Mr. Anbian for his comments on my article. We have little disagreement over the literary merit of Castillo's work; both of us find some poems too rhetorical, others profoundly political or spiritual. But on broader issues, we disagree significantly.

Mr. Anbian distorts my argument by making a partisan of a "weak tradition of political engagement." It wasn't the political content of Castillo's work to which I objected. I criticized a handful of poems that seemed to have value *only* as tools of propaganda (defined correctly, I am happy to assure Mr. Anbian). I think a good work of art is more than a tool; think, for instance, of "Guernica" or Brecht's *Mother Courage* (in which the playwright's artistry unintentionally subverted his political message, by making the evil protagonist so believable as to become a heroine). Castillo was able to make very good art which incorporated his politics into something that transcended (Mr. Anbian grinds his teeth) them. That's why the clinkers seem especially fake, e.g., the *pro forma* celebration of happy East German workers written at a time when the Berlin Wall was being built to keep them from running away. (If Mr. Anbian wants to talk about moral choice, perhaps he can address that point.)

I disagree with Mr. Anbian's reading of Reinaldo Arenas. While the relationship between oppressor and oppressed may have remained constant in the Cuba he describes, I think Arenas would say that the Revolution made a lot of difference—it threw him into a concentration camp because of his sexual orientation. Certainly there have been improvements in Cuba in the past 25 years, as there have been isn't disputing statistics about better dental care for children in the rural provinces. He's writing out of his own experience as a prisoner at forced labor. One need not be a scholar of the Cuban revolution to see the rural provinces. He's writing scholar of the Cuban revolution to see the self-evident truth of anger and oppression that led to ferocious vision of similarities between conquistadors and Castroites.

It is one of the most precious, and occasionally most annoying, assets of an artist that he or she can choose to draw connections that are not necessarily congruent with anyone's political line. For me, that fidelity to personal experience mediates the experience or "the people" far better than political doctrine. Mr. Anbian disdains such "inconsequential 'subjective truth'" with certitude of Roman Curial officials who declared for centuries that "error has no rights." That's why insists that "the truth [by which he means, "a Marxist understanding"] of history" is a precondition for a poet to fully understand "what is object truth; but despite the best Marxist arguments I've heard, they seem to me matters of faith, not evidence. Poems may reflect, or even espouse; but to, the best will always do more than see the world through the eyes of dogma, and will be valuable as more than tools of "historic choice."

## IN MEMORIAM

Jackie Curtis  
Ralston Farina  
Al Katzman

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James Ruggia, Editor

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## IMAGES ARE DANGEROUS By Rob Breznsky

Jazz Press, 345 Coral Street,  
Santa Cruz, CA 95060. \$5.95.

I know nothing about Rob Breznsky. I got this book, *Images Are Dangerous*, in the mail. And after reading it I know less than before. The first line in the first poem of this book, "Here's How You Get to Know Me Better," reads, "First you always pretend you mean the opposite of what you're saying." What? Well, assuming by transference we can hold Breznsky to his own advice, that is, that Breznsky does not mean the opposite of what he says, but merely *pretends* to, then we can take him at his word. Rob Breznsky is sincere—but "ironically sincere," to use his own paradox-slogan.

Actually, the tradition of tongue-in-cheek sincerity runs deep in modern and contemporary poetry. Rimbaud mixed metaphors with a wildness that defied sense, but no one doubts the honesty of his sensual visions. The 20th century surrealists are likewise earnestly anti-rational. And even a giant of contemporary poetry like John Ashbery requires an ironic suspension of reason for access to his deft collages, fraught with uncompleted import. The list goes on: Samuel Beckett, James Tate, Ron Padgett, Elaine Equi. . .

Breznsky adds to this anti-tradition his fertile, thick, perverse imagination, which strings out long bewildering lines on his idiosyncratic obsessions:

a wild disciplined saint spreading her legs to ignite the pornographic urges of my higher chakras and dream me awake into a life after sex and death where barking children burn money to please my arch-enemies and protectors the Angels of No Fucking Opinion.

Wild dreams, exotic spells and love charms, ridiculous made-up horoscopes with equal parts pulp-pop sleaze and moody mysticism, sexual and religious commingling. These bundle up and disjoin again into arbitrary dialects, illustrated by the book's many diagrams, lists, quizzes and with everything thematically dominated by Breznsky's series of oxymorons: "wildly disciplined," "demonically compassionate," "aggressively sensitive" and, of course, "ironically sincere."

Giant concepts—Sex, Politics, Religion, Teleology, Love—all fit in Breznsky's mutating dialectics. But though they are mangled into a weirdly Breznsian form, they hold more poetic truth than 100 pop-psychology books from the 70s. For instance, this is from his essay on morality, "Looking for Bigger, Better, More Interesting Problems":

Thus... we should distinguish between *bad stingy dumb danger* and *good generous smart danger*. A poetic, ironic, partially disguised moral sense is the key to creating the latter. A literal, static moral system, on the other hand, can be worse than no system at all. It frequently generates in its users a fatal attraction to *bad*

*stingy dumb danger*.

. . . Which is Breznsky uniting the apparently opposed fields of ethics and esthetics: mock disgust flung at both rigid moralizers and lax whateverists because both fail to include the other in a fully satisfying, i.e. poetically whole, dialectic—"Pleasure enhances intelligence when pleasure is under the influence of a permanently revolutionized morality that esthetically invokes good generous smart danger"—danger being the quality Breznsky seeks in his images because they mutate personality, just as his poems are clumps of split personalities fighting it out in obedience to Dangerous Images. And so on.

The final pages of the book consist of an "Images Are Dangerous Personality Text" (readers are urged to send their answers to the author—apparently the answers could comprise the basis for an *Images Are Dangerous* volume peculiar to each reader), "Cataclysm and Apocalypse Survey" (where we can vote for our favorite doomsday scenario). A "Dream Glossary," and last, a table of contents; as if after swimming through all this wild and anti-rhetoric, we were able to sense some rational design in the book.

This is how *Images Are Dangerous*—more than a poetry collection—is a completed world-view, a way of perceiving it. And it prevents itself from the self-slavery and pretense of most such ambitious books by its own ironic sincerity. Or maybe I'm taking it too seriously. Because it's pretty funny too.

—Jack Skelley



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## OINK! 18

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