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(Not) a Mother, (Not) a Worker: Rethinking Gestational Surrogacy Beyond the Binary

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(NOT) A MOTHER, (NOT) A WORKER: RETHINKING GESTATIONAL SURROGACY BEYOND THE BINARY

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INTRODUCTION TO PHD TOPIC

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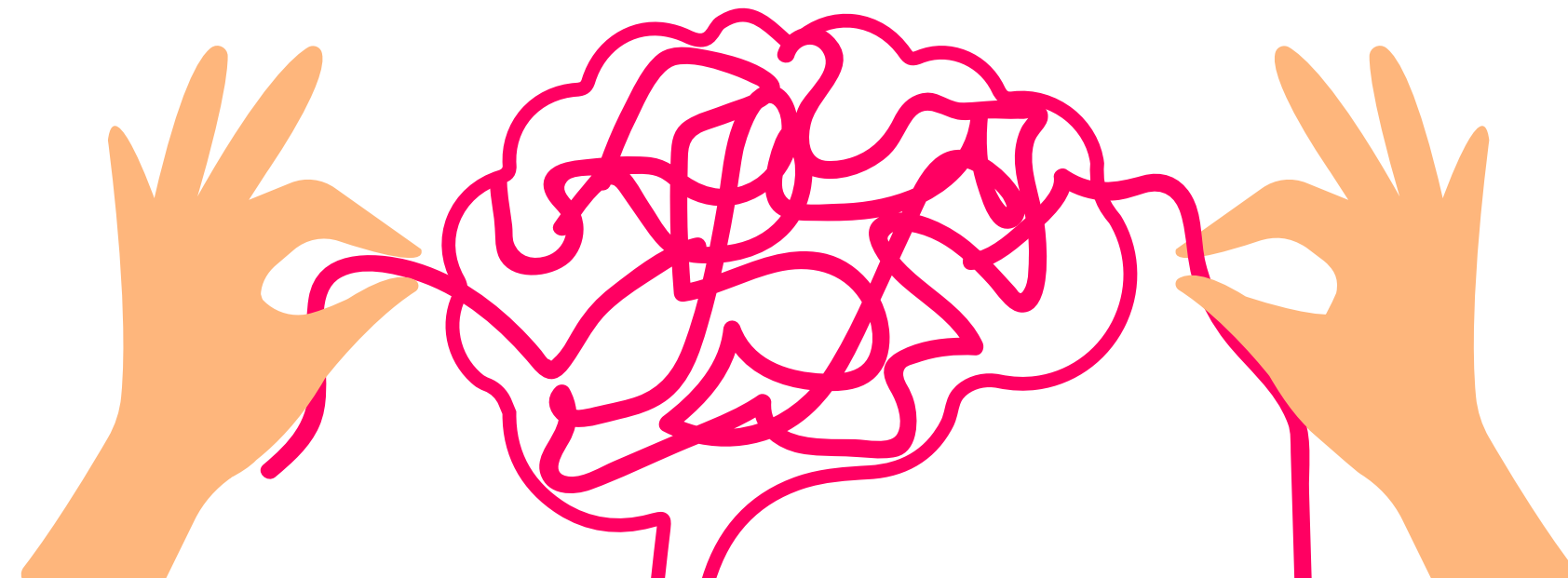
- **Comparative analysis of work-life conditions** of Latin American nannies in Belgium & Latin American gestational transnational surrogates in Colombia
- **Migrant nannies and transnational gestational surrogates have many things in common:**
 - can engage in non-genetic kinning with the child/baby
 - perform outsourced feminised labour
 - stratified reproductive labour in a transnational context
- Significant societal differences in how the roles are treated



RESEARCH PROBLEM

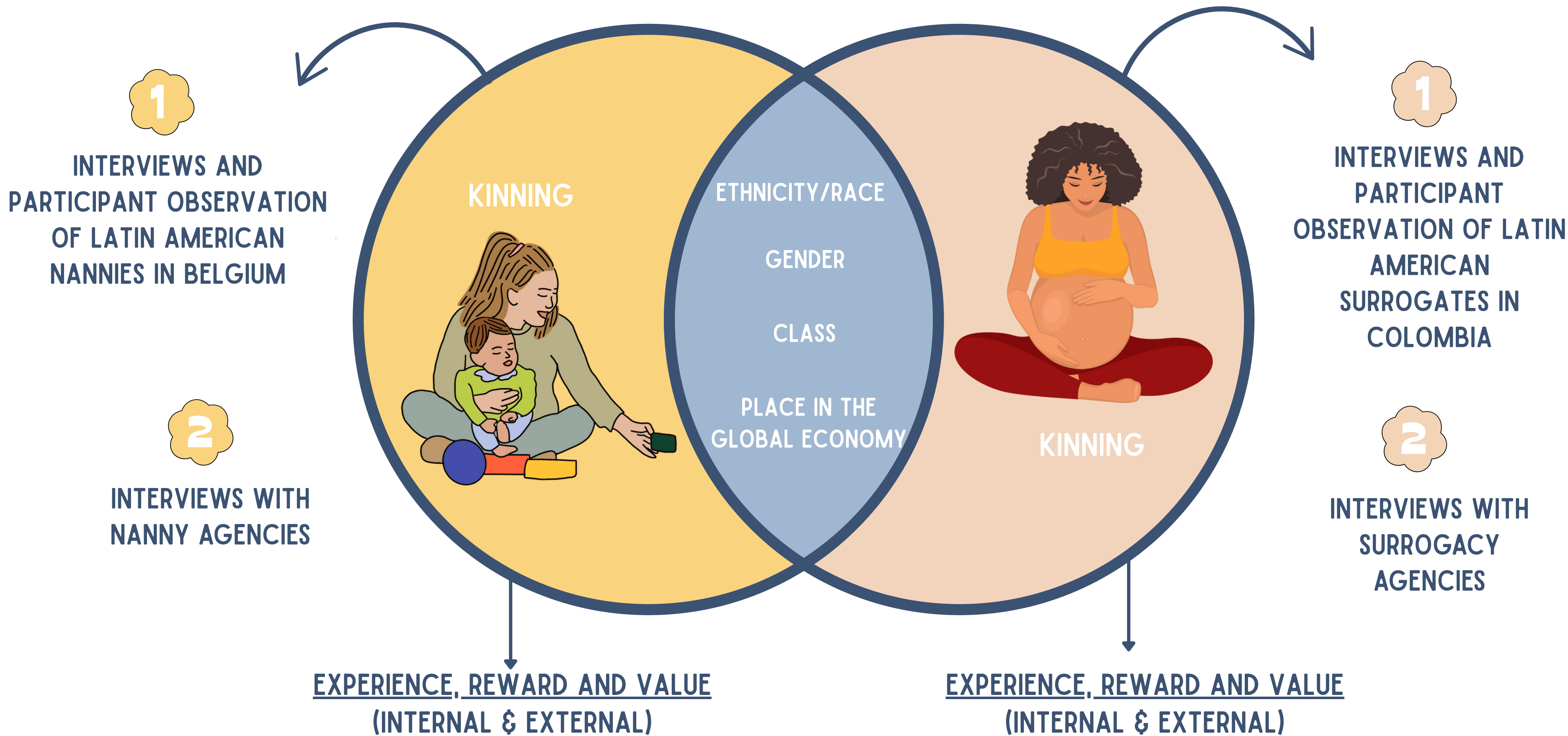
NEW KINSHIP STUDIES + STRATIFIED REPRODUCTION THEORY (COLEN 1995)

When elements of ethnicity, race, gender, class and place in the global economy intersect, in what ways are paid child-bearing and child-raising differently experienced, valued and rewarded and how does perception of non-genetic kin influence that?



CHILD-REARING

CHILD-BEARING





APPROACH TO SURROGACY RESEARCH

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

PANDE'S CLASSIFICATION OF SCHOLARSHIP ON SURROGACY (2010):

1) LEGAL AND FEMINIST WORKS THAT DEBATE THE ETHICS AND MORALITY OF THIS PRACTICE



2) RADICAL FEMINIST LITERATURE THAT VIEWS IT AS THE "ULTIMATE COMMODIFICATION OF THE FEMALE BODY"



3) SCHOLARSHIP FOCUSING ON THE IMPACT OF SURROGACY ON CULTURAL MEANINGS OF MOTHERHOOD AND KINSHIP



INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

1

→ **CGS is not uniquely exploitative** compared to other forms of reproductive labour in the global capitalist economy (Parry 2018) (live-in domestic work, child care, eldercare)

2

→ Importance of **not engaging in “totalizing or homogenising views”** of commercial gestational surrogacy (Leyra, Ayala and Cubillos 2023)

3

→ Today’s practice of transnational surrogacy is a **result of unequal global power dynamics and deeply-rooted cultural (mis)conceptions about motherhood**

KEY THEORIES

FEMINIST
POLITICAL
ECONOMY

POLITICAL
ETHICS OF
CARE

NEW KINSHIP
STUDIES

DECOLONIAL
FEMINISM

FEMINIST POLITICAL ECONOMY

- Reproductive labour is unequally distributed on a transnational level
- “Postcolonial, neoliberal, and legal geographies shape consumption and labor in the global fertility market”(Schurr 2018)

Reproductive rights: Wealthier, urban, straight, married and White(r) persons in Global North have more access to ARTs (Schurr 2018)

Reproductive governance: majority of countries in the Global North ban surrogacy (or make it altruistic)

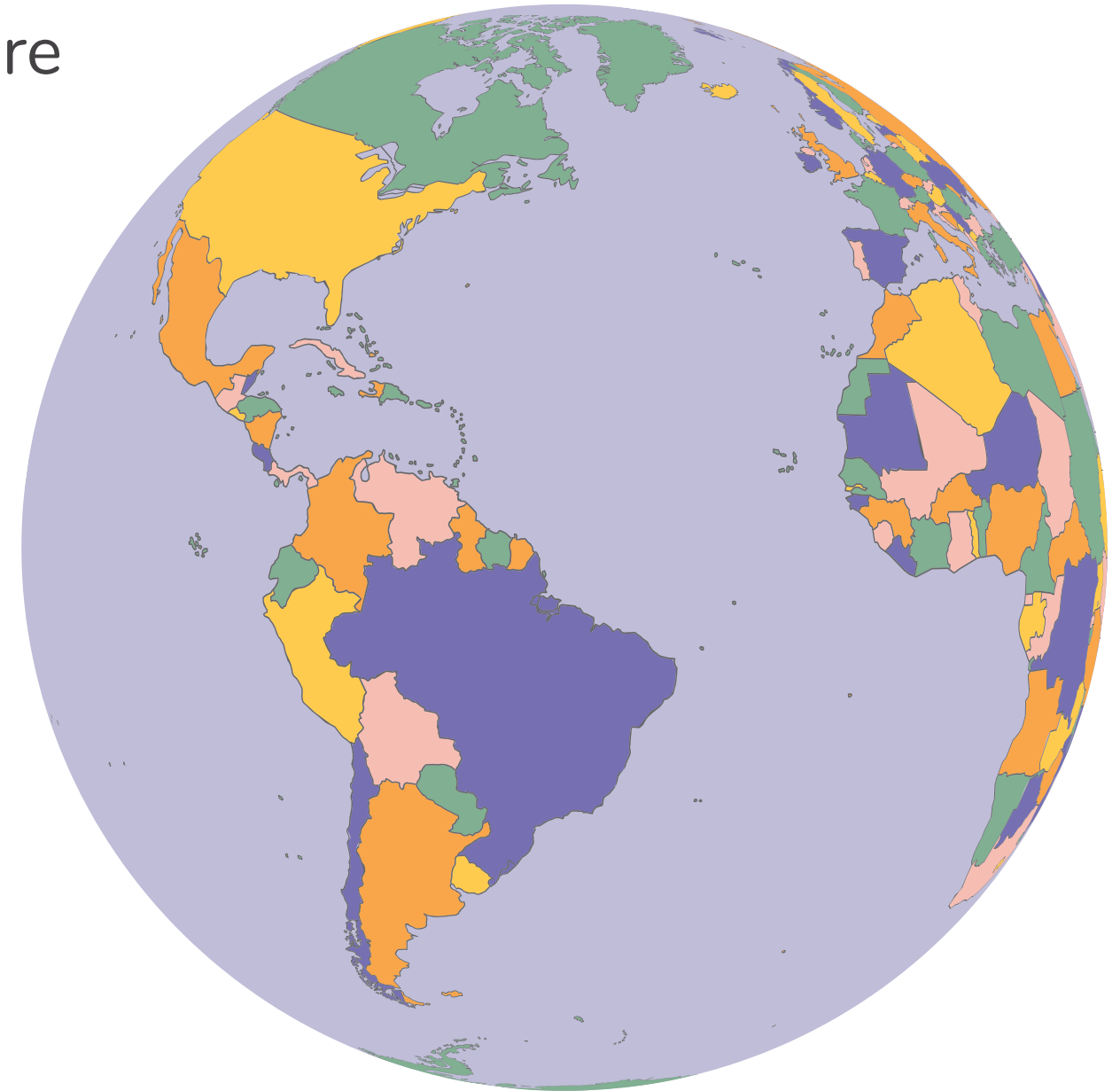


FEMINIST POLITICAL ECONOMY

→ Middle-class and upper class persons in the Global North (but also Global South and Global East) seek solutions to have children elsewhere

- Commercial or quasi-commercial surrogacy only available in a dozen countries in the world
- Majority of them located in the Global East (Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, Georgia) or Global South (Colombia, Argentina, Mexico)

Reproductive justice: for whom?



FEMINIST POLITICAL ECONOMY

- (De)valuation of paid reproductive labour founded in the **systemic devaluation of motherhood as unpaid reproductive labour**
(Walker and Moore 2018)
- Feminist scholars (Federici 2012; Fraser 2011) argued that the centuries-old capitalist separation between reproduction and production puts reproductive workers in the grey zone between the two



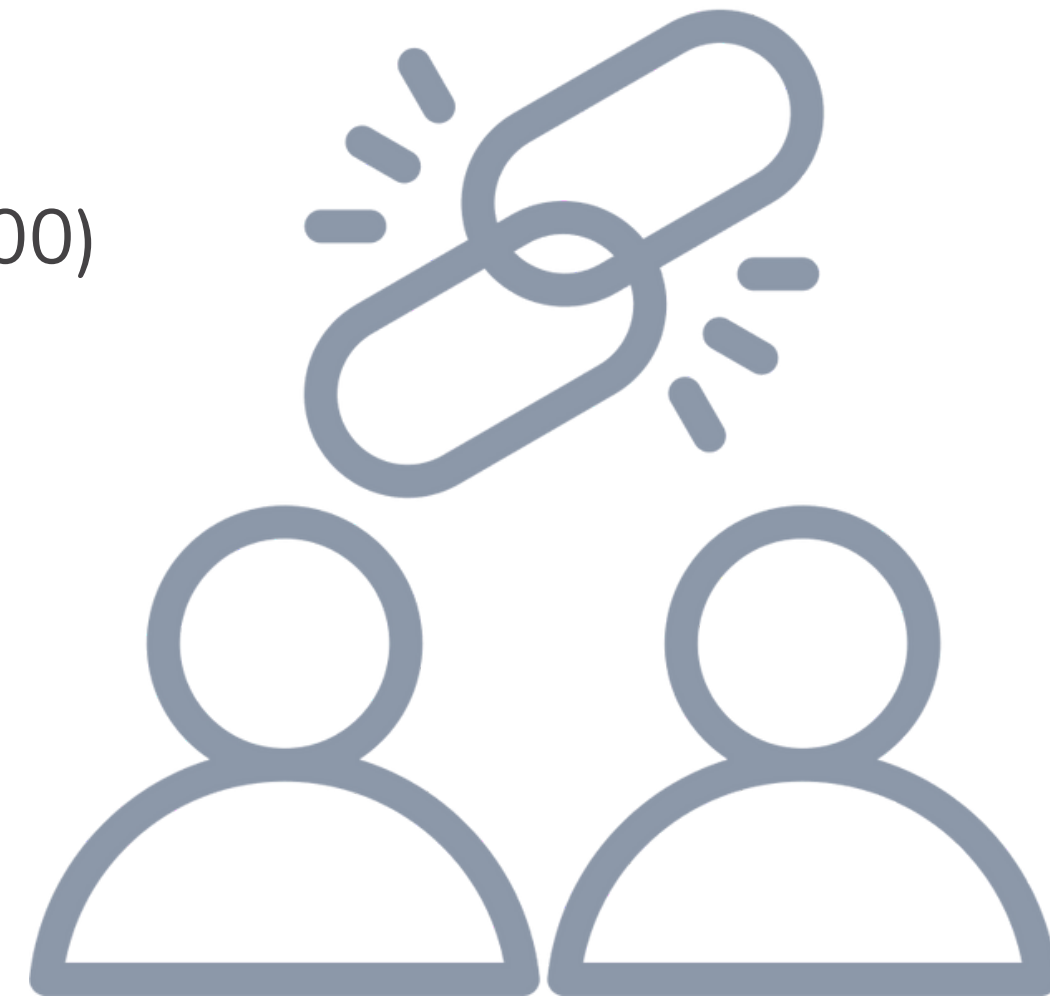
POLITICAL ETHICS OF CARE

- “Re-evaluation of the value of paid and unpaid care” and elements of recruitment, pay and conditions of care workers (Williams 2001)
- Scholars pointed out the precarious working conditions, health issues, and social isolation surrogates can face in different geographical contexts (Pande 2009, Nilsson 2022, Vertommen 2024, etc.)
- Importance of exploring hopes, aspirations and positive experiences surrogates get on individual and collective levels from their labour



NEW KINSHIP STUDIES

- Modern forms of reproduction, such as **surrogacy**, challenge current notions of kinship
- Complex choreography between social and biological kin that is inconsistent and susceptible to specific contexts and situations
- Kinship is a continuing process rather than a set of categories (Carsten 2000)
- Based on Carsten's contributions, we can start thinking of kinship as an "arena of flexibility, negotiation and experience" (Miller 2007)



NEW KINSHIP STUDIES

- Surrogacy studies provide a basis to explore kinship ideology (Ragone 1994) and concepts of the natural (Teman 2006)
- Psychosocial research about surrogates is heavily impacted by Western notions of motherhood (Teman 2008)
- Presumption that women form prenatal attachments to the child they carry and surrogates are in “deep denial of what they have done” (Teman 2008)



NEW KINSHIP STUDIES

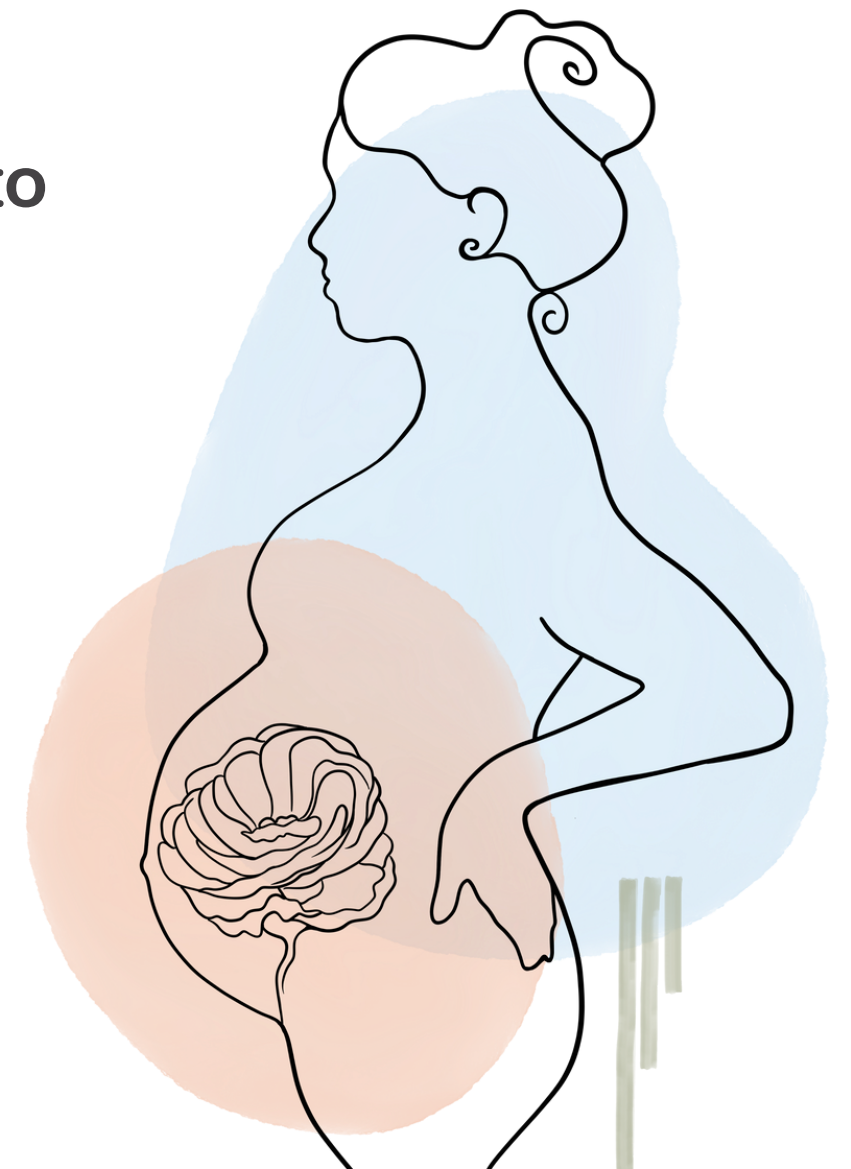
- The majority of surrogates stated that the process of relinquishment of the baby is a joyfoul event and would do surrogacy again (van den Akker 2007; Teman 2006)
- **Bonding is not “natural” but a culturally constructed concept that depends on the woman’s conscious decision**, not an innate “natural” predisposition (Teman 2008)



“Address the findings that surrogates engage in complex cognitive and embodied efforts to manage their emotions, identities and relationships during surrogacy” (Teman 2003)

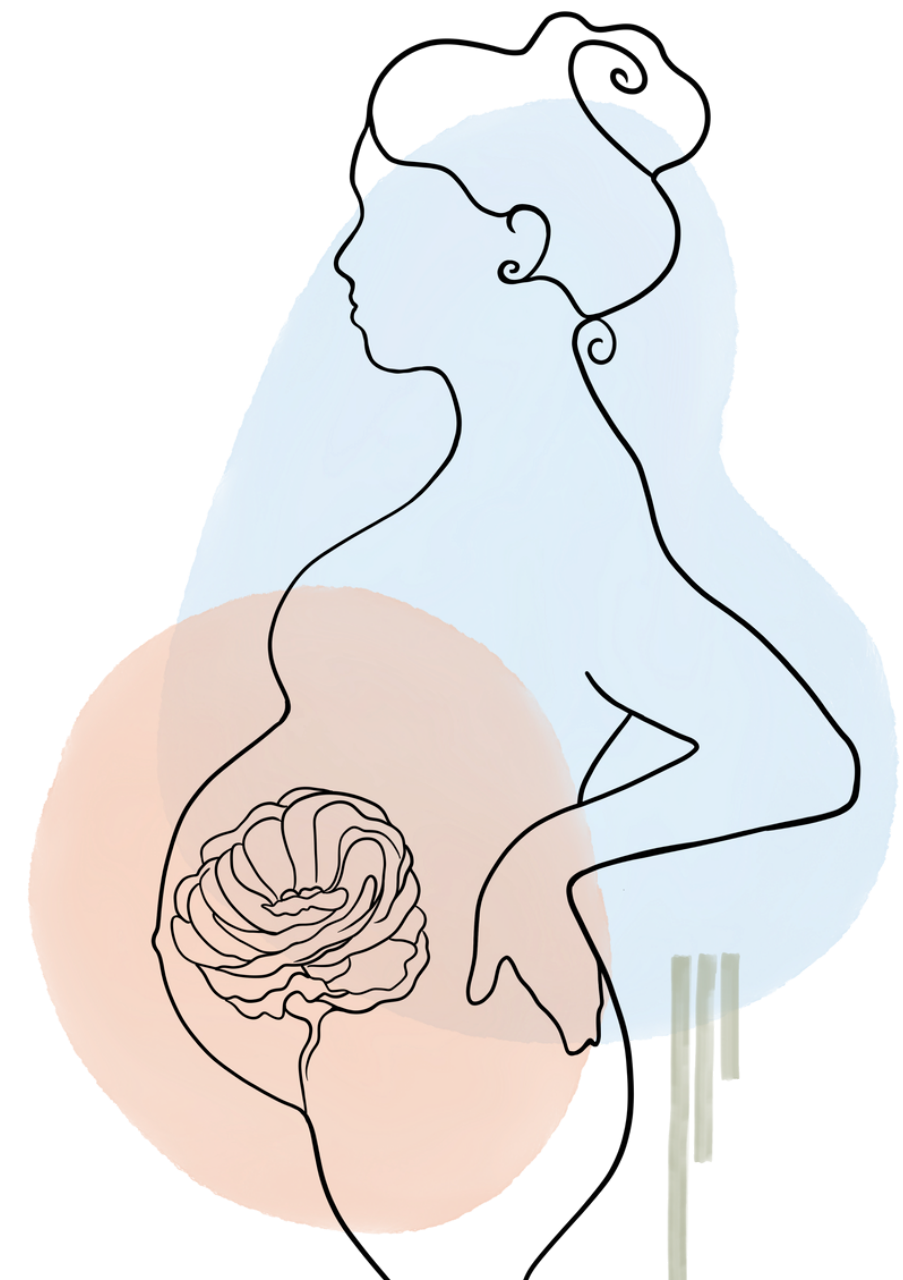
NEW KINSHIP STUDIES

- Studies of kinship and ARTs stresses mothers, surrogates and egg donors minimise/maximise their genetic/gestational contribution (Thompson 2001)
- **Clash between ARTs preference of genetics over gestation in comparison to local understandings of surrogacy**
- Indian surrogates' constructions of everyday kinship → blood, breast milk, shared company, gestational labour, giving birth (Pande 2009)



NEW KINSHIP STUDIES

- Thai surrogates' and babies' shared identity through blood (Whittaker 2018; Nilsson 2022)
- Importance of recognising the complexity of new ways of conceiving and gestating and the links it creates reduces suffering (Parry 2018)
- **Purposeful downplaying of the crucial labour surrogates do can create “genuine exploitation” and cause psychological suffering** (Leyra, Ayala et Cubillos 2023)



DECOLONIAL FEMINISM

- Centering surrogates' experiences without universalising them → *Epistemic justice*
- Valuing surrogates' experiences without attribution to European/Western moral frameworks
- Developing understanding of local moral frameworks (Zigon 2007), but not generalising the experiences
- Contextualising how global power dynamics, economic, racial and gendered hierarchies impact today's surrogacy practices



DECOLONIAL FEMINISM

→ PARTICIPATORY AND RECIPROCAL RESEARCH + AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHY (X COLONIAL BLIND EPISTEMOLOGY)

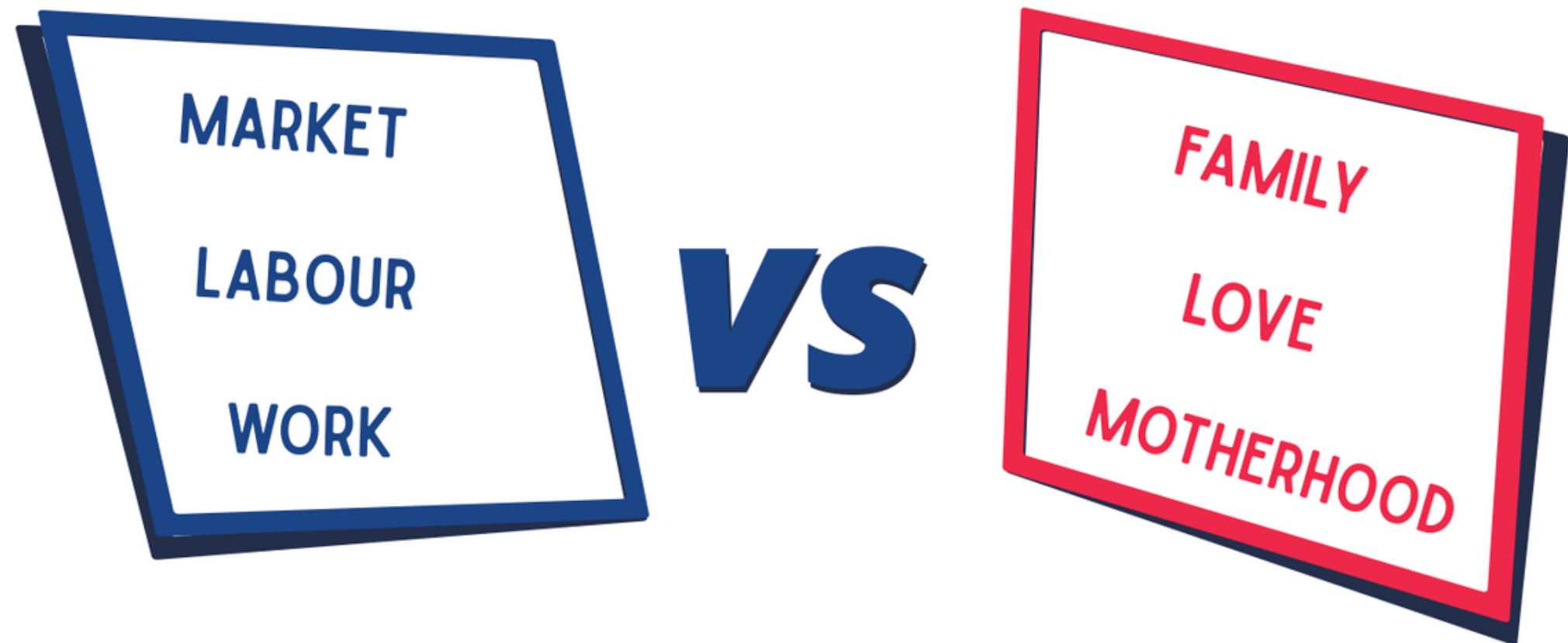
- Recognising sets of biases wheter one is an insider, semi-outsider, outsider (Hossein 2016)
- Decolonization as a continuous process of “becoming, unlearning and relearning of who we are as a researcher and educator” (Datta 2018)
- Research should not only produce knowledge but positively influence those who participate in the research (Moje 2000)



BEYOND THE BINARY

- Reproductive roles are often put in **binary terms**, not showcasing their intricate connections or co-production (Pande 2014)

“Tendency to cast surrogate’s motivations into dichotomous, often antagonistic categories such as either altruism or monetary gain may reveal more about American culture than it does about surrogacy itself.” (Ragone 1994)

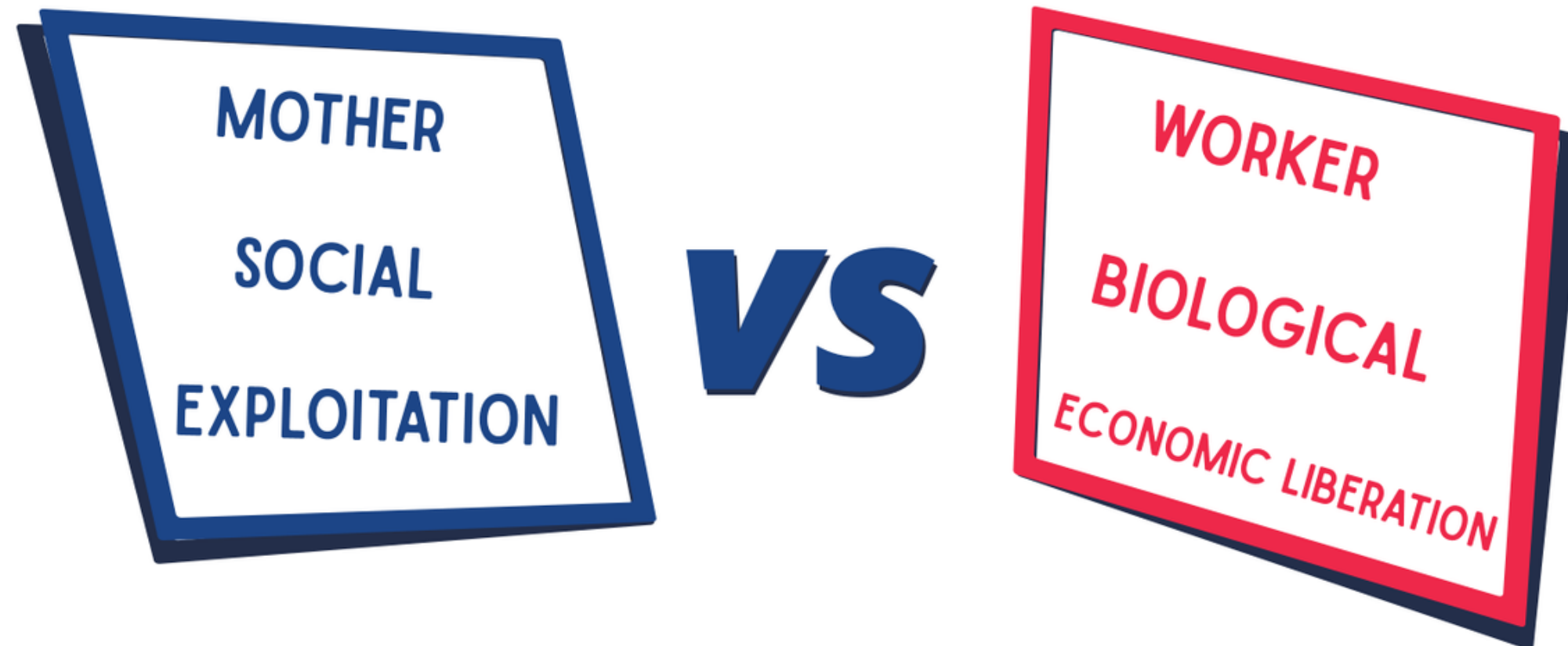


- Surrogate asked to be “disciplined contract worker” and a “nurturing, selfless mother” at the same time (Pande 2009)

FEMINIST POLITICAL ECONOMY

- *Ethnographic turn* → avoiding binary approaches to surrogacy → surrogates' experiences over abstract/normative concepts (Leyra, Ayala and Cubillos 2023)

→ GOING BEYOND THE DICHOTOMIES OF (PART OF A SPECTRUM) :



THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION!

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