

Our Research is Living, Our Data is Life: Toward a Transdisciplinary Gerontology

by

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Abstract: In this keynote presentation given at the 2016 Association for Interdisciplinary Studies conference, I considered the field of gerontology from a transdisciplinary perspective. Juxtaposing personal narratives with dominant and alternative discourses on issues of aging, later life, and old age, I explored such questions as: Given the multifaceted, diverse and context-dependent nature of aging phenomena, what might be said to be the defining characteristics of the field of gerontology? Is the common claim that gerontology is “fundamentally interdisciplinary” borne out? How are phenomena of aging—and the aging subject—constructed within (and without) the field? What might a transgressive approach to gerontology that embraces the wild and ultimately untamable lived experience of traveling through the life-course look like?

Keywords: gerontology, critical gerontology, transdisciplinarity, autoethnography, aging

Opening: The Gero-Punk Manifesto

I am a gero-punk (and a practitioner of gerontological anarchy). This is my manifesto.

What is a “gero-punk,” you ask?

Well, far be it from me to claim to have a definitive answer, but I will say this: To be a punk of any sort is to live experimentally, to live in love with emergence, with the unexpected, the chaotic, the improvisatory, to live with your arms wide open to complexity, guided by your own star, fueled by a good measure of playfulness and well-intentioned rebellion.

To be a gero-punk is to bravely and critically reflect upon, interrogate, and create new ways of thinking about and experiencing the aging journey.

A gero-punk sees through and resists normative aging ideology, and challenges others to do so as well, or at least to understand the implications of normative aging ideology before living by its rules.

Gero-punks resist “simple states of consciousness” about aging and later life, and choose, instead, to dwell in the messiness, the undeniable complexity, of deep human development and aging.

To be a gero-punk is to explore the art of time-travel, to learn how to be grounded simultaneously in the present while respecting (and learning from) the past and dreaming the future.

To be a gero-punk is to engage in ongoing embodied praxis—experiential, contemplative, and creative practices. We promise to sometimes stop moving, stand still, and just breathe....and ask: If you didn’t know the year of your birth, how would you know your age? Where does age reside? We behold the mystery: We are a particular age, all ages, and no age at the same time.

To be a gero-punk is to possess the audacious belief that we are, each and every one of us, legitimate makers of meaning, and so too are all other creatures. That our own precious lives provide the grounds from which understandings emerge.

What this also means is that we acknowledge what we can’t possibly know prior to our own lived experience—I may have been a Gerontologist for more than half my life, but I’m yet to be an old Gerontologist. I have no expertise about old age, so I’d best rely on the old experts themselves. But what I can do as a gero-punk is to try on different ways of moving through the world so as to develop empathy and imagination about old age—and other—experiences I’ve yet to (or may never) encounter.

As gero-punks, we place our attention and awareness upon odd, unexpected, flummoxing, and contradictory aging experiences; we accept our own experiences and those of others as sacred and real, if yet (or perhaps always) unexplainable. We celebrate the way life always finds a way to spill over the edges of our attempts to simplify, categorize, and contain its wildness.

As gero-punks, we are willing to let ourselves and others experience and express “outlaw emotions”: disillusionment and

despair and resentment and fear—fear of our own and others’ aging, fear of our own and others’ ends.

As gero-punks we are committed to taking gerontological anarchy to the streets, to pursuing brave and bold conversations, and meaningful, transformative learning with persons experiencing all ages and phases of the life-course.

And, as gero-punks we engage in the seemingly contradictory practice of asking questions about the meanings of all of this, of this wild and fantastic and unfolding aging journey, without immediately engaging in analysis and jumping to solving problems. Rather, we rejoice in the spilling-forth of yet more questions. We let the questions carry us away.

Our research is living. Our data is life.

Interlude

*I began this presentation with *The Gero-Punk Manifesto*, which I wrote several years ago, because it represents for me my ongoing attempt to enact a transdisciplinary approach to gerontology. My intent in this presentation is to not only talk about becoming a transdisciplinary Gerontologist, but also to demonstrate through its choreography—its form and content—my main assertion that transdisciplinarity is a potentiality only realized through its intentional enactment. In that spirit, before I go forward, I want to revise the subtitle of my presentation, from “Toward a Transdisciplinary Gerontology,” which as you will discover contradicts what my main claim is, to “Toward Becoming a Transdisciplinary Gerontologist,” which truly is at the heart of this presentation. I thank Tanya Augsburg for her very fine article, “Becoming transdisciplinary: The emergence of the transdisciplinary individual,” which inspired me to change my sub-title (Augsburg, 2012).*

Okay—here we go.

Origins and Contexts

I have worked in the so called “field of aging” for more than half my life, beginning in my teenage years as a certified nursing assistant and, when I was an undergraduate studying music and psychology, as an intern in social service and advocacy organizations. I chose “interdisciplinary” programs for both my Master’s degree and my Ph.D. because the kinds of questions I’ve been preoccupied by since girlhood have been the sort best taken on synthetically, often collaboratively. I’ve always loved a good mash-up.

During seven years of graduate school I had the opportunity to engage with a lot of great research and theory from multiple fields and disciplines, but the “interdisciplinary” part was left to me to figure out. Not only weren’t there any courses that engaged us in the principles and practices of interdisciplinary work; there weren’t even any conversations—formal or informal—about what such work might entail. So I muddled my way through, working simultaneously within my central area—gerontology—and outside it, in women studies, critical social theory, adult development and learning, and the history of the human sciences. My dissertation focused on older women’s embodiment and used a synthetic theoretical framework informed by phenomenology, life-span development, and critical sociology perspectives. My early post-graduate career in the field of aging included community-based program development and evaluation, outreach in under-served rural communities, and teaching as an adjunct in a graduate interdisciplinary studies program. After that, for eighteen years I served as the founding director of an intentionally interdisciplinary gerontology program and chair of an undergraduate human sciences department at a small private liberal arts university that focused primarily on adult learners. In December 2015, I left my faculty position—a story for another time—and in many ways returned to my origins: teaching adjunct at a community college; freelancing as an educational gerontology consultant, speaker, facilitator, and writer; and taking gerontological anarchy to the streets.

Some Important Yet Not Often Asked Questions

How do we know that gerontology is being done when we see it? How do we know a Gerontologist when we see one? What do Gerontologists think they are doing when they do gerontology? What makes gerontology different from other academic disciplines and fields of study and practice? What are the questions, issues, and problems around which gerontology organizes and institutionalizes itself? How are these questions, issues, and problems specifically gerontological, rather than something else? Who gets to call herself or himself a Gerontologist, and who doesn’t? (And does it even matter?)

Gerontology is commonly described as the academic area subsumed within the larger field of aging that is concerned with the multi-faced aspects of adult aging—biological, psychological, social, cultural, political, economic—as well as the policies and programs associated with adult aging. What differentiates mainstream gerontology from related disciplines and fields of study is that the focus of gerontology—its “unit of analysis”—is the

multifaceted, ecological, universal phenomenon of aging which is mediated by “economic, structural and cultural factors” (Hendricks & Achenbaum, 1999, p. 22). While other disciplines and fields take on the questions, issues, and problems of adult aging, it is gerontology which foregrounds adult aging phenomena, first and foremost.

Since its early days of emergence and institutionalization in the previous century, gerontology has made fierce knowledge claims. Gerontology claims to be a scientific enterprise; while the scientific and positivist paradigms are the center of gravity for the preponderance of mainstream gerontological research and theory, there are also some important counter-paradigms represented by alternative, minority approaches such as critical gerontology (Biggs, et al., 2003), cultural gerontology (Twigg & Martin, 2015), narrative gerontology (de Medeiros, 2013), and age studies (which isn’t gerontology at all but a hybrid field that emerged in direct opposition to mainstream gerontology; see Gullette, 2004).

Another common knowledge claim made on behalf of gerontology is that it is fundamentally and by its very nature interdisciplinary. The logic behind this assertion is that because human aging is a complex set of interconnected phenomena, about which we are attempting to accumulate valid empirical data that will (hopefully) inform practice, our ability to describe, explain, and respond to aging phenomena requires perspectives and approaches from multiple disciplines. But, as I suspect most of us here would acknowledge, harnessing multiple approaches and perspectives, while perhaps necessary and certainly powerful, doesn’t constitute interdisciplinary (let alone transdisciplinary) inquiry and practice.

In actual fact, gerontology is a *multi-disciplinary* field of research, theory, education, and practice, though some small minority of Gerontologists do engage in interdisciplinary praxis. Nested within gerontology are multiple and many disciplinary-based, specialized focuses, and within each of these is a plurality of theoretical, methodological, and practice approaches. Among those working in the field you can find people who’ve been trained in just about every academic discipline and field of study and practice who focus their work on aging issues and, thus, consider themselves to be doing gerontology, if not being Gerontologists. That people working in such a wide variety of disciplinary contexts organize their work around questions about aging, later life, and old age is testament to the persistence and significance of these questions, as well as their relevance across many disciplines and fields. But the phenomena of aging are so complex that few Gerontologists foreground the complexity and, instead, in the grand scientific tradition, choose a facet of aging upon which to focus. As well, despite the claims

of some prominent Gerontologists, the assumption that there is a central paradigm that gives coherence to these varied and numerous gerontological enterprises is highly contestable (see for example Ferraro, 2013).

Among those working in the field you can also find people who have very little formal education but a ton of life experience and on-the-job training who are doing the frontline work of caring for older persons in the community and in institutionalized settings. These fine folk are the heart and backbone of the field of aging though they are mostly disenfranchised from the formal gerontological enterprise.

Not only does gerontological inquiry happen within and outside gerontology proper, but in anticipation of the North American baby boomers' transition into later life, there has been an explosion of new niche services, products, businesses, and marketing strategies targeted at older persons (but often with little or no connection to the field of aging, let alone grounding in gerontological knowledge, which concerns some Gerontologists who feel that they, alone, should determine the criteria for education, training, products, and services targeting issues of aging, and later life, and old age).

Interlude

Human beings are multi-dimensional creatures who are not only biological organisms but also makers of meaning in complex contexts—minds, spirits, social actors, members of societies and cultures, and travelers through time. Given that, to understand—let alone explain—adult aging, we need to explore every facet, seen and unseen, of this human experience. This requires the individual and collective efforts of many researchers, theorists, practitioners, and teachers working both within and outside of gerontology, as well as the vital input from the persons—older adults—whom we claim to be doing our gerontologizing on behalf of and, equally important, the persons who care for them.

The deal is—and this is incontrovertible—that aging is an emergent, complex process that unfolds over a long period of time—the entire life course!—and is shaped by the times/places and spaces in which it is contextualized. Aging thus invites, even demands, more from me than the multi-discipline of gerontology as it currently constructs itself is able to offer me.

How on earth can my life's work devoted to this wild, emergent, complex process be anything but wild, emergent, and complex?

Becoming Transdisciplinary

My search for a wild, emergent, and complex approach to our travels through the life course led me—about twenty years ago—to the critical gerontology framework, a minority and alternative approach to gerontological education, theory-work, research, and practice that challenges mainstream, normative gerontological truth-claims and modes of work.

Resisting neat categorizations and extending provocative notions from Deleuze and Guattari, Stephen Katz refers to critical gerontology as “a pragmatic and nomadic thought-space across which ideas flow and become exchanged...a magnetic field where thought collects, converges, and traverses disciplines and traditions” (p. 16).

Dwelling in the critical gerontology “thought-space” are several strong principles that inform and guide my ongoing inquiry and practice:

- 1) the importance of acknowledging and bridging the biographical and historical, the personal and political, and social structures and individual agency;
- 2) the commitment to critically reflecting upon and thinking about self, society, and the field of gerontology itself;
- 3) the privileging of collaborative theorizing, not only with other scholars and educators but with my students and especially with elders, the very subjects of—and potential partners in—my inquiry as a Critical Educational Gerontologist;
- 4) the commitment to grappling intentionally with—rather than attempting to simplify or reduce—the complexities of what it means to be a human being; and
- 5) the imperative that the ultimate outcome of all of my striving must be a deeper understanding of life-long human development and aging in the service of personal, social, and cultural transformation (Sasser, 2014).

What I consider to be especially powerful about critical gerontology is that it serves as a meta-framework, a comprehensive sensibility within which to ask and pursue answers to questions about the most complex features of our travels through the life course as human beings. Critical gerontology foregrounds the recognition that who we are and the work we do in the world are inexorably intertwined. And, most crucially, it provides a lucid counter-argument to the narrow and over-determining normative discourses and practices that still dominate a great deal of the research and theory regarding adult development and aging, later life, and old age.

As I mature into my professional (and personal) life—and bounce back from a number of professional and personal challenges over the past decade and more recently—I have come to recognize the importance of turning

the lens of critical gerontology back upon myself, to ask myself probing questions, such as those stated so eloquently by critical gerontologist Ruth Ray:

What have I been doing all these years and why? What motivates—even compels—my research and theorizing? How has my personal life shaped and been shaped by my work in gerontology? How has my sense of the field, and myself in it, changed over time? What do I celebrate—and regret—about my scholarly life and the progress of critical gerontology overall? What do I see as the central issues for critical gerontologists in the future? (2008, p. 97)

I have been supported in my movement toward deeper critical reflection and praxis especially by Simon Biggs who, in his discussion of research training for a critical sensibility toward aging experiences, asserts quite boldly that “We need, then, techniques by which to know ourselves and the contexts in which we work” (2005, p. S125). He continues, advocating that “identifying multiple sources of empathic understanding...and attending to biography, oral history, and testimonia may be used to enhance a will to understand. The problems of...amnesia of depth, indicative of seduction by simple states of mind, plus their undertow, the avoidance of personal anxieties with age, point to a need for enhanced self-reflection of this type” (2005, p. S126).

I remain convinced of the relevance and power of the critical gerontology ethos for my work-in-the-world, but something even more elemental began happening in me, about a decade ago: I decided to take the principles of critical gerontology so seriously as to try to live my daily life informed by them (not only employ these principles in the context of my work as an educational Gerontologist). As well, I decided to take my lived experiences from the “rest of my life” so seriously as to attempt to live my life as an educational Gerontologist informed by them. Consistent with the forms of critical and creative praxis described in the radical scholarship of bell hooks, Margaret Gullette, Ruth Ray, and Laurel Richardson, I ditched the templates for gerontological scholarly inquiry and writing which I was socialized to endlessly replicate and began engaging in a form of auto-ethnographic inquiry and writing from within and through the many muddles and confusions of my own and others’ travels through the life-course to (hopefully) a place of deeper understanding.

But my resolve to commit myself life-wide to critical gerontological praxis was not enough, I needed the help of others, their insights and provocations, in order to do so; thus, I also recommitted myself to a collaborative mode of work whereby I would invite anyone—colleagues

and students, friends and family, kids and elders, even strangers—who is interested and willing to think with me, to engage in conversation and collaborative mulling-over of the big (and little) questions about what it means to be a human being.

It has only been in recent years that I have begun to recognize my work as an educational Gerontologist committed to critical theory and praxis as embodying and enacting the principles of transdisciplinarity. My explorations of transdisciplinary philosophy and methodology have been grounded primarily in the work of Nicolescu (2002; 2010) as well as in the very insightful syntheses and applications articulated by Julie Thompson Klein (2004; 2014), which I commend to you.

You will recall that earlier I made the claim that interdisciplinarity isn't about content, but about process. While a project, program, or group may aspire to interdisciplinarity and even intentionally design the conditions for interdisciplinary inquiry and praxis to take place, interdisciplinarity is ultimately realized through its enactment. I would assert that the same claim can be made of transdisciplinarity. (This is why I changed the subtitle of this presentation. One becomes a transdisciplinary through a commitment to and engagement in transdisciplinary work. Transdisciplinarity does not exist in some static form or by name only, but exists through its enactment.) But how do we know we are actually enacting the principles of transdisciplinarity?

To answer this question, let us now turn our attention to some of the principles and practices characteristic of transdisciplinary work across disciplines and fields of study. A transdisciplinary sensibility and approach:

- embraces and foregrounds complexity;
- resists “simple states of consciousness” including dualistic ways of thinking;
- minds “the gap,” making room for what dwells in between, including that which can't be seen or explained;
- recognizes that reality is multidimensional and expressed through multiple interconnected levels simultaneously;
- transgresses institutional, disciplinary, and paradigmatic borders and boundaries;
- commits to the difficult work of communicating and collaborating across differences;
- commits to the difficult work of critical self-reflection on one's own lived experiences and attempts to live transdisciplinarity life-wide;
- commits to addressing current “wicked problems” while envisioning (and creating) better possible futures;
- respects creativity, play, spirituality, the unconscious...that

which can't be contained or explained.

Enactment: Three Transdisciplinary Projects

What I'd like to do now is share three recent and current collaborative projects that embody and, I hope, enact a form of transdisciplinary gerontology.

No Longer Invisible: Co-creating a "Gerontology: The Basics" Course with Housekeeping Staff at a University-Based Retirement Community

In 2015, the executive director of a university-based retirement community affiliated with the university where I was then on the faculty asked me to teach a basic course on aging to the housekeeping staff. The executive director's operating assumption was that the housekeeping staff didn't know enough about aging to be effective at their jobs and I, as a Gerontologist, could teach them the basics. I offered a counter suggestion, that I and one of my gerontology graduate students (Cynthia McKee) partner together and co-create with the housekeeping staff a "Gerontology: The Basics" course which would emerge from what they already knew and had experienced (my assumption being that they were already experts on serving older adults in the capacity in which they worked). As well, I suspected that they had desires for ongoing professional development and life-long learning opportunities and that this course would give them the chance to assess their needs and aspirations, as well as offer an empowering educational experience in that they'd be collaborating with us rather than being the passive recipients of information that others had deemed they needed. The result was a nine-session course that took place from February through June 2015, every-other-week, from 7:15-8:15 a.m. All members of the housekeeping staff were given the opportunity to participate in the course, and those who self-selected to do so were paid overtime to attend the course. A total of 14 people participated—12 women and 2 men. Most of the participants were from immigrant communities and either had never attended college-level education or were first-generation college students attending community college. We used a collaborative design approach—only general themes were pre-determined; participants shared responsibility for the direction and flow of each session. Throughout each session we explored what participants enjoyed about their work and what they'd like to learn more about so as to continue to develop professionally and personally. We discussed educational and other professional opportunities that they might want to pursue in the

future. We critically examined work-place policies and practices that participants felt excluded or disenfranchised them because they were “mere maids” and invisible. (For example, though the housekeeping staff often have the most regular and frequent contact with residents, they are often excluded from knowledge that one of the residents they serve has died or moved to a different level of care.) Other themes we addressed included myths and realities of adult aging; “normal” aging and later life experiences; self-care practices for long-term care professionals; ageism and the language of aging; how culture shapes our own and others’ aging experiences; resilience and aging; and new models for growing older and wiser. Throughout the nine sessions, we used images and words—especially poetry—as ways into rich discussions. We also employed contemplative and creative practices such as short mindfulness meditations, communal art projects, and individual reflection and writing.

The Conversation is the Relationship: Oregon Humanities Conversation Project

Oregon Humanities is a statewide organization committed to “bringing people together across difference” (<http://oregonhumanities.org/who/about/>). One of the preeminent programs offered is the Conversation Project, a collection of no-cost ninety-minute facilitated conversations on a variety of issues and topics that are offered in community settings to members of the public. Since 2015, I have served as a facilitator for the *Talking about Dying* program, the primary goal of which is to create an open and safe space for exploring our feelings about our own and others’ ends (but not to engage in debates or problem solving about end-of-life decision making). In addition, I co-facilitate, with Simeon Dreyfuss, the Conversation Project *Just a Number: Aging and Intergenerational Friendship*, a conversation that begins with the question, “If you didn’t know the year you were born, what age would you say you are?” In this Conversation Project, we deconstruct the ideas of age and generation, surfacing the ideas about age and aging that get in the way of our ability to connect across generational differences in the spirit of friendship. We ask the question, when does age matter and when doesn’t it? Our hope is to foster the causes of and conditions for the cultivation of friendship across differences of all sorts, including age and generation.

Taking Gerontological Anarchy to the Streets: The Gero-Punk Project

In 2012, I launched the Gero-Punk Project, a virtual and Portland,

Oregon-based collaborative community. The Project includes a blog (www.geropunkproject.org) on which I publish my own and others' reflections on our travels through the life-course. Essays focus on themes such as aging awareness and identity, ageism, loss and grief, intergenerational friendships, wisdom and creativity, and the challenges and gifts of growing older. Authors come from diverse backgrounds and include multiple generational perspectives and experiences. (the youngest author was in his teens at the time I published his essay; the oldest author was in her early nineties at the time I published her series of reminiscences.) In addition to the blog, the Gero-Punk Project hosts a series of salons in the Portland, Oregon, metropolitan area. These salons are two-hour facilitated sessions open to the general public in which we explore together potent, controversial, and under-explored topics connected to aging, later life, and old age. Recent Gero-Punk salon themes include "outlaw emotions" connected to aging, such as fear, anger, and resentment; ageism and cross-generational conflict; and playfulness and creativity (we created collaborative poems together around topics related to growing older). As embodied in the Gero-Punk Manifesto with which I began this presentation, the Gero-Punk Project aims to challenge the dominant discourses about aging and becoming old, including the central dogma of gerontology itself, and to co-create with others new, sufficiently complex and nuanced models for being more present to our travels through time.

As we approach the end of this presentation, I'd like to offer a short creative piece that I wrote for the Gero-Punk Project that embodies—I hope!—a transdisciplinary spirit.

Closing: Gero-Punk Dream

I am jogging around the city, slow and loose, fully occupying my body. I am alert and aware. I have to be—it is daytime (the angle of the sunlight suggests an early autumn afternoon). There are humans of all ages (and many dogs) doing what creatures do on a beautiful day.

So. I have an audience.

There's a satchel slung diagonally across my back. Inside the satchel are cans of spray paint: red, black, and silver. I am tagging buildings, spans of pavement, even park benches and the sides of buses. I am leaving my mark with panache and impunity, defacing whatever surface calls out to me.

Life is short! Act now!

Aging is inevitable. Ageism isn't.

You are an age, all ages, and no age at once. Embrace this mystery.

I am a gero-punk graffiti artist. Only I know that my spray paint is impermanent and will wash away when it rains.

There is a person striding toward me— look at them frown and fume!—as I begin to spray

AGING....

on the sidewalk in front of the playground at the park. They ask me what I think I am doing. I respond by asking them what they think *they* are doing.

We look at each other, eye-to-eye, for what seems like a long time. They have lovely eyes: We share silver hair though I have peacock blue streaks in mine. We are about the same size and height, it seems to me, though what do I know—I always feel like I am the same size and shape, even the same age, and like I am similarly embodied, in relationship to whatever creature I happen to be observing.

Enough already. I have surfaces to deface.

I tilt my head to the right and hold up a can of silver spray paint.

They tilt their head to the left (are they mimicking me?) and hold up their splendidly ornamented walking stick.

I say: Care to come closer and take a look?

They are frozen at first. Then they shuffle side-to-side in a dance of indecision.

So I shrug my shoulders in response. I return to my work, finishing the gero-punk inscription

...EVERY BODY'S DOING IT!

My peripheral vision sucks but I feel movement and energy originating from behind me, arcing wide to home in at my right side.

I keep at my project until it is complete.

AGING: EVERY BODY'S DOING IT!

I turn to look at the stranger beside me. They are sussing. And either they have intensely bad hyperopia or they are about to kick my ass.

Left hand on my hip, can of silver spray paint in my right hand,

I ask: So? What do you think?

They say: What the hell do you know?

I say: I am not sure what the hell I know. What the hell do *you* know?

Then I offer them the can of red spray paint.

Biographical Note: JENNIFER (JENNY) SASSER, Ph.D., is an educational gerontologist, writer, and community activist. Jenny has been working in the field of gerontology for more than half her life, beginning as a nursing assistant and aging advocate before focusing on research, writing, and teaching. After completing her doctorate from Oregon State University, in 1997 she joined the Marylhurst University faculty and during the subsequent nineteen years was involved in designing educational programs for adult learners. She served as Chair of the Department of Human Sciences and Founding Director of Gerontology at Marylhurst University from 1999 to 2015. Jenny is co-author, with Dr. Harry R. Moody, of *Aging: Concepts and Controversies* and of the forthcoming book *Gerontology: The Basics*. She convenes the Gero-Punk Project (www.geropunkproject.org) and offers consulting and presentations throughout North America. An award-winning educator, Jenny's recent citations include the 2012 Association for Gerontology in Higher Education Distinguished Teacher award and a Willamette University Distinguished Alumni award in 2014. Jenny is on the part-time Gerontology faculty at Portland Community College where she teaches Supporting End-of-Life, Ending Ageism, and Psychology of Adult Development and Aging, and is a facilitator and trainer for Oregon Humanities. She may be reached at littlecoracle@gmail.com.

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