

Reflections of *Inferno* in Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills*: An Intertextual Reading

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Abstract

This paper attempts to define the eclectic and structural nature of Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills* by examining how the novel's intertextual reading spurs on to accomplish its final textual integrity. And also, it addresses the African American desire for recreating a black version of the American dream and the resultant destructive effects and the fragmentation of their psyche which forms the crux of the novel. Naylor evolves *Linden Hills* based on Part I of Dante's epic poem *The Divine Comedy* (1321) titled *The Inferno*. Like Dante and Virgil in *The Inferno*, the dual protagonists of this novel Willie Mason and Lester Tilson, the young poets, are left to ponder over the journey to gain insight into human failings or undergo a significant revelation. The implementation of intertextuality spotlights the similarity between the existing text and the more established classical texts taken for analysis. The model text helps to unravel the aesthetic, philosophical and thematic quality of the text and also engenders their related successful associations.

Keywords: American Dream, Hell, Intertextuality, Journey, Material Prosperity, Spiritual Awakening

1. Introduction

As an African-American novelist, Gloria Naylor, like many Black women authors of her time, is concerned with the dynamics of Black womanhood and instincts for survival in a racist and sexist society. When African-American women writers speak of survival, it encompasses not just physical survival but also psychic and emotional survival. Naylor acknowledges her concern for the Black women through all possible ways and trajectories to save them from distortion and destruction thereby empowering them.

The intertextual reading of the text motivates the reader to become even more connected with the text taken for association and to further cherish the primacy of the work. The employment of this intertextual structure illumines the text's function to perpetuate, embody, displace and restructure the notions of knowledge and power. It is quite natural to explore an idea to find the meaning of the text while reading as literary texts are fully loaded with meaning and the readers have to extract it from the text which is called

interpretation. Such interpretation remains a highly challenging task in the current literary and cultural theory. The modern theorists think that the texts are lacking in independent meaning and that is what the theorists call intertextuality. As the reading becomes highly problematized, it demands a different reading strategy. Accordingly, the act of reading drives the reader towards the fabrication of textual relations. It is vital to unearth those relations for the successful interpretation and the discovery of its meaning. To accomplish this, the reader has to move between the texts, where lies the meaning of the text. The literary device called 'Intertextuality' creates an interrelationship between the texts and engenders correlated understanding in separate works.

2. Intertextuality

The term 'intertextuality' made its first entry into the French language in the late 1960s with the poststructuralist Julia Kristeva's early works *Word, Dialogue and Novel* (1966) and

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The Bounded Text (1966-67). Kristeva broke the conventional ideas of the author's 'influence' and also stated that the text's 'sources' are drafted so as to transform the previous signifying systems. Then a literary work is not just the product of a single author, but of its association with other texts and to the structural aspects of the language itself. It was she who introduced the most influential Russian literary theorist Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin to the French-speaking world. Bakhtin's work is highly influential among the various fields of literary theory and criticism, linguistics, philosophy, political and social theory and many other disciplines. Intertextuality and Bakhtin's works are inseparable and to understand intertextuality, it is crucial to understand the work of Bakhtin. Bakhtin explains the extraction of meaning through the " 'primacy of context over text' - heteroglossia, the hybrid nature of language - Polyglossia and the relation between utterances"³.

Like Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes, critic and theorist, emphasizes the reader's active participation in the process of reading and the meaning making process which signifies the birth of the reader. And also he undermines the significance of the author as the sole source of meaning and declares the death of the author. A literary text has no meaning unless it caters to reading activity. Barthes considered literary texts to be composed of multiple signifying practices and differential traces giving rise to indeterminacy, plurality and circularity. This concept of plurality of meaning is known as 'textuality'. Therefore Barthes reveals that the outcome of 'textuality' is meaning itself and is not protected since it is open to the reader's interpretation. There are no constant truths in knowledge or belief, everything is relational, when a text has a trace of another text's trace, it becomes intertextual. This notion of Barthes' textuality is one of the important outcomes of post-structuralist theory.

3. Naylor's Revision of Dante's *Inferno*

Linden Hill deals with the destructive materialism of upward mobility of the suburban black people. In *Linden Hills*, Naylor has dramatized the possible negative consequences of achieving the American dream, an attainment which has dodged most African-Americans for over a century. During the time when education as a way of social mobility was posed as a rescuer for African-Americans, Naylor interrogates its means as well as its ends. Naylor has portrayed a few successful, well-educated, middle class African-Americans who have achieved their American

dream at the expense of their racial identities. Dante's implementation of the theme of portrayal of distorted Eden is akin to the tales of lost souls who have trapped in the White dream. Therefore an intertextual reading of Dante's *Inferno* is adopted to examine closely the intricate structure of the novel.

4. *Linden Hills*' Landscape

Linden Hills is set in an upper middle class community, Linden Hills, which has been constructed in a huge area of land owned by the Nedeed family for more than 150 years is purchased by Luther Nedeed after selling his octoroon wife and six children into slavery in 1820. Naylor has made the point clear that the venturing to lift themselves to the ranks of the white society economically results in a superficial victory. Like Dante and Virgil in *Inferno*, the two young poets Willie and Lester, the residents of Linden Hills, take odd jobs with the residents of Linden Hills to earn money for Christmas. They begin their work from an elevated area down towards the bottom of the hill in circular drives. The affluent families live at the bottom of the hill nearer to the Nedeed home. Each day as their journey moves down the hill, Willie and Lester encounter suicide, hypocrisy, death, treachery and exploitation. They agonize and fury over the people who pursue a worthless, deathlike existence. Naylor strips away the facade of their material accomplishments so as to expose an underworld of chaos and misery. Naylor advocates that the black people who desire the white lives and material success are pawns of demons and devils and will encounter the torments of hell.

Dante's *Inferno*, the fourteenth century epic poem, is an allegory narrating the journey of Dante through Hell along with the Roman Poet Virgil. The Hell is depicted as nine circles of suffering placed within the earth. In *Inferno*, the souls are damned neither because they offend God nor violate the religious system but because they offend themselves. The inhabitants of Linden Hills with their only motive of upward mobility have turned away from their roots, their past and from the deepest sense of their self. This seems to be a subject of serious concern for Naylor, over the cost the African Americans are expending just to attain social and economic success. Naylor, like Dante, looks at man as a rational being who has the power of choosing and so his choices matter. *Linden Hills* represents the results of man's choices as depicted in Dante's Hell. To characterize this state of action, Dante describes Hell as an extremely large funnel shaped pit that lies beneath Jerusalem, which is reached through the Dark Wood of ignorance and con-

fusion. The nine concentric circles contain different groups of sinners who are not fit for heaven and deserve the punishment of Hell.

Parallel to Virgil guiding Dante in his journey through Hell, Lester helps Willie to have a smooth sailing in Linden Hills because Lester and his family live on the first crescent drive. Above Hell, just below Jerusalem, is a plateau engaged by the neutrals, those who are devoid of any distinct moral choice. Under the Plateau, Hell is broadly classified into two classes one for the sinners of uncontrolled appetite and the other for the sinners of malice or the misuse of reason. In the first circle of Hell is Limbo where the unbaptized and the virtuous pagans reside because they preceded Jesus Christ, and is Virgil's home in the afterworld. As Dante identifies Virgil's poems, Willie reads Lester's poems even before he admits to his friend that he too is a poet. Circle two is for the sinners guilty of lust, circle three for gluttony, circle four for avarice and prodigality and circle five for anger and melancholy.

In the second class, the sinners are punished in lower Hell called the City of Dis, a walled-off section, under the control of Satan "the tightest circle, where there is the universe's center, seat of Dis, all traitors are consumed eternally"². Circle six is for the sinners of heresy, circle seven for the sinners of violence: marauders, tyrants, spendthrifts, blasphemers and suiciders. Circle eight is for frauds, seducers, evil counselors and hypocrites. Ninth circle, which lies beneath the eighth circle, is for the sinners of treachery. The center of the Hell is occupied by Satan, the Lucifer who is portrayed as a giant, daunting beast with three faces-red, black and pale yellow. Each face has a mouth that chews on the arch traitors: Judas, Brutus and Cassius.

Linden Hills can also be paralleled with the moral topography of Dante's *Inferno*. Willie Mason resides in a poor neighborhood of Putney Wayne situated above Linden Hills. While Willie is strolling through Linden Hills, as earlier done by Dante, he examines the moral flaws of the lost souls of the blacks he encounters. Willie has gained a spiritual awakening when he escapes from the frozen lake which lies at the bottom of Linden Hills. The new Willie has determined to do away with his aimless wandering and resolves to meet the demands of his life. He realizes his commitment towards his life and becomes a decisive builder. Instead of blaming others or destiny for his problems, he comprehends the fact that he can decide a mid way between the poverty of the ghetto and the immorality of Linden Hills.

5. Linden Hills and Inferno: A Parallel Reading

Linden Hills is crossed by eight concentric drives which lead to the home of Luther Nedeed. The first crescent drive through the fifth crescent drive is similar to Dante's Upper Hell of circles from one to five. Tilsons, Winston Alcott, Kiswana's parents, Michael Hollis, Chester Parker and Xavier Donell - all reside on these streets. All these people correspond to the people of Dante's first five circles. The upper five streets' residents have forsaken personal and family ties, which Naylor believes are the first ties surrendered by the African-Americans moving up to the American society. On the fourth crescent drive, characters like Lycentia Parker, have also lost their ethnocentric sense of selves. On the fifth crescent drive, Michael T. Hollis, even though he holds some sense of his own ethnocentric identity, has lost both family and spiritual ties. Naylor's description of the untoward consequences of upward mobility of the Black American community is thus delineated through her topography. The counterpart to the Lower Hell of Dante's *Inferno*, the Tupelo Drive area, a more exclusive segment, lies below Linden Hills, which corresponds to the City of Dis. The house of Luther Nedeed surrounded by a frozen lake is situated at the center of Linden Hills. The fifth line of the original Luther Nedeed has come from Tupelo, Mississippi who founded this area in 1820. The Nedeeds have been playing the role of both real estate developers and undertakers and thus have been dominating the inhabitants both in life and death. The novel's tale traces two journeys. One is the physical journey of Willie through Linden Hills and his spiritual awareness on what the true success should be and the other is Willa Nedeed's discovery of Nedeed women's past history and her realization on how women achieve success through their failures.

Each of the residents, who want to gain one of these people, should renounce something, a portion of his soul, his bond with his past or his community, his moral and spiritual values, even his self-image. The people of Linden Hills take their living on a circle that is suitable to their 'sins' as Dante's lost souls. Whoever moves down, for instance Ruth Anderson, has returned to Putney Wayne. This remains the best thing for her. It has taken her away from the living death that is the nothingness of life in Linden Hills. The last part of Frazier's *The Black Bourgeoisie* affords an appropriate description of Linden Hills as "The black bourgeoisie suffers from 'nothingness' because when

Negroes attain middle-class status, their lives generally lose both content and significance”¹.

Dante has conceptualized Hell as a threefold region which consists of nine concentric, descending circles which are considered as an eternal home of remorseless sinners. Hell is reached by entering the gates whose famous inscription declares the end of all hopes and then into the Vestibule of the indifferent people who earn neither praise nor blame and the angels who do not disobey God or do not place faith in Him. Then the river Acheron lies beyond this Vestibule. Limbo is one among the nine circles; the true hell appears beyond Limbo.

The topography of both *Linden Hills and Inferno*, has numerous similarities. Linden Hills is built on a “V shaped section of land with the boundaries running south for one and a half miles from the stream that bordered Putney Wayne’s high grazing fields down a steep, rocky incline of brier bush and linden trees before curving through the town’s burial ground and ending in a sharp point at the road in front of Patterson’s apple orchard”⁵. Putney Wayne’s grazing field has been bounded by Wayne Avenue, its northern side is the business district of apartments and its back windows view down into Linden Hills. Ruth and Anderson, who are not a part of Linden Hills, live in these apartments and this area is separated from Linden Hills by a stream which corresponds to Dante’s Acheron. Topographically this area corresponds to Dante’s Vestibule of Indifferent People, Ruth and Anderson, remain its touchstones. Ahead of Wayne Avenue, Wayne Junior High School is situated, from where both Willie Mason and Lester Tilson have graduated.

The first day’s work of Willie and Lester which begins at Winston Alcott’s residence at second crescent drive, synchronizes with Dante’s second circle of the lust dwellers, the carnal sinners who subject reason to desire. “There is no hope that ever comforts them – no hope for rest and none for lesser pain”². Mr. Alcott who resides outside Linden Hills, suggests Winston that only through marriage he can move down in Linden Hills. As a reward, Luther Nedeed will grant Winston a lease on the exclusive Tupelo Drive because of his approval of a destined marriage. The story of Winston and David is suggestive of Dante’s Paolo and Francesca, the lovers who fell in love after reading an Arthurian romance. By way of punishment, these lovers are locked in an eternal bonding. Although Francesca and Paolo’s brother are married, Francesca falls in love with Paolo. Discovering this love affair, Francesca’s husband kills both of them and buries them in the same tomb. In Naylor’s fiction, David avers to Winston by reciting and parodying a Whitman poem that if he goes through the

marriage, their love will come to an end. Unlike the eternal bonding of Paolo and Francesca, Winston’s and David’s punishment is a permanent separation. In this circle, David suffers a lot because of his love for an unworthy man, yet, among the betrayers, Winston wants to move to the lower Hell that is to lower Hills. Therefore both are dejected. Willie is terribly shocked when he surmises the relationship between David and Winston and then Winston’s rejection of it. At first Willie wonders how “someone black could afford”⁵ such a lavish reception. However, Willie later realizes that beyond this dazzling surface, the wedding guests fail to live their life as they are spectators of their living. Then Willie meets Xavier Donnel, a resident of third crescent circle which is reminiscent of Dante’s third circle of gluttons. “Remember now your science, which says that when a thing has more perfection, so much the greater is its pain or pleasure. Though these accursed sinners never shall attain the true perfection, yet they can expect to be more perfect than than now”².

During the four days of work in Linden Hills, Willie suffers from frightening nightmares reflecting his day time experiences. Three of his dreams are similar to Dante’s dreams in the Purgatorio. In his first dream, he sees a huge clock with spiders and snakes for hands, then of hands shooting out from lines of coffins offering him false gifts. Finally he dreams of himself as a man with no face. The dreams sketch the path of degradation that Willie had observed in Linden Hills and also the lures he has encountered and rejected. On the Eve of Christmas, sitting alone on his window sill Willie recollects from his memory the journey he has undertaken so far. He determines that, “there was no such thing as fate or predestination. He wasn’t too certain about there being a god, but if there was one, he wasn’t up there pulling any strings. People pulled their own strings, made their own fate”⁵. Willie determines to leave Putney Wayne and his choice is not for Linden Hills. Before his shift to a life beyond Linden Hills, Willie and Lester have to complete one more task, to help Luther Nedeed in decorating his family Christmas tree. Luther Nedeed pays them the money equal to what they have earned all these four days.

Willie meets Luther Nedeed’s wife Willa Prescott Nedeed. She has been making her own journey through time exploring the history of the Nedeed women. Except the last one, all the men of the Nedeed family have married octoroon women. Each wife produces a black child who remains both physically and spiritually a copy of the father. But Willa Prescott Nedeed gives birth to a boy of fair complexion who takes the genes of his maternal ancestors’ light skin tone. Luther Nedeed suspects that the child is not his

own and so he torments his wife by putting his wife and the six year old boy in a secluded place which is in the morgue basement of their home and provides them insufficient food and water which leads to their son's death.

But Willa remains in the room and peeps through the trunks and papers in the room from which she learns the stories of the earlier Nedeed women. She realizes that those women underwent increasing depersonalization because of the cruelty and evil demeanor of their husbands. But the reasons for Willa's sufferings are her own. She has become a traitor to herself by betraying herself after her willing immersion of her own self in her husband's house. Instead of fighting, as a faceless device lacking nerve and conscience, she allows her husband to starve their son to death. She believes that if she remains quite without protesting against her husband's brutality, Luther Nedeed will release her from the basement room and they can give birth to another child. Willa's story is parallel to count Ugolino of Dante's ninth circle, who was imprisoned with his sons and grandsons in a tower and starved. But, unlike Ugolino, at last Willa finds salvation.

6. Willa's Redemption

Willa gets her redemption from the previous Nedeed women's records she found in the form of diaries, letters, photographs and cook books. Through this incident, Naylor implicitly conveys to the reader that the history of women is found not in official archives and books but in the oral wisdom of grandma Tilson or Roberta Johnson and in the existing records of the daily lives of women. Willa reads the papers of Luwana Packerville who belongs to her husband as she was brought to him even before marriage. He uses her just to produce a male heir and after that he completely ignores her. Her enslavement by her husband makes her lose faith in God. Luther prevents Luwana's cooking, the only service she is allowed to offer her husband and son. There has been no one to speak to Luwana, even her silence, the muted self, remains unnoticed. In a desperate condition she writes letters and replies to herself. Previously she was a religious and pious woman, but now she loses her faith in god as she says, "There can be no God remained. Yes, whoever you were, Luwana Pakerville, you were right about that. This house couldn't still be standing if there were god"⁵. Next Willa finds the history of Evelyn Creton Nedeed, the second Nedeed wife, when she discovers a cook book in the basement room. Evelyn is obsessed with cooking as she attempts to captivate her world through food. In order to attract the attention of her husband, though not his real love, she cooks huge meals and grinds

up various aphrodisiacs in the dishes she serves him. "She baked continually and in equally huge amounts"⁵. She has lost hope in winning the affection of Luther with the two devices; Evelyn torments herself by consuming little food and in taking large doses of laxatives which leads to her death.

Willa discovers some pictures through which she learns the tale of the third wife, Priscilla McGuire, who is more sentient, highly-spirited and more sophisticated than the two previous wives. A sequence of photographs draws her increasing deterioration right from a happy smiling, newly-wed Nedeed woman to a mother progressively more held down by her son, which casts a deeper and deeper shadow across her face. She has been changed from a woman who has a strong sense of self identity to a gradual fading and finally to complete disappearance. Willa comments "her face was gone"⁵. Priscilla's absence in the family is identified through the last photograph. Willa "came to the last photograph. And scrawled across the empty hole in lilac-colored ink was the word me"⁵. These three wives correspond to the three arch-traitors, Judas, Brutus and Cassius in Dante's Hell at the center where Satan exists. The three arch traitors are chewed by Satan as they have betrayed their benefactors or their lords. Here the Nedeed women have betrayed their own self as each of them is denied and disrespected by their husbands. Luwana has become her husband's silent victim, for instead of blaming her husband's victimization, she blames God. Evelyn craves to win the affection of her husband but at last she fails in her attempt which impels her to destroy her own physical body. Priscilla is worse. Without fighting, she observes the shadows of her husband and her son thereby blotting out her soul.

The story of the previous Nedeed women clarifies that throughout history men have taught that women have no values by themselves. According to men, women have no real existence by themselves and therefore they do not have any history. After her encounters with the three Nedeed women, Willa realizes her self existence which is denied by men for generations. Willa's realization of her mistake is her self assertion for the first time. She realizes that she is responsible for her life. It is not Luther who leads her down to the basement steps, but she has stepped down by herself and she will be able to come back up at any time when she is ready. This realization equips her with strength and power but still she feels exhausted and then sleeps. Recreation and awakening of her personality take place in her dream, and she decides to put her house in order.

Willa's ascension from the basement and her emergence into her home, reveal that she has discovered her lost identity. Then she cleans the dirty basement room where

she has been living for several weeks. She walks up carrying the corpse of her son and opens the door which leads into her kitchen. When the Christmas boxes Willie balances tap against the bolt on the door, Willa miraculously opens the door from the other side. While Willie accidentally knocks open the latch of the door, both Willa and Willie concurrently see her image in the mirror.

There in the mirror next to the open kitchen door was a woman, her hair tangled and matted, her sunken cheeks streaked with dirt. Her breasts and stomach were hidden behind a small body wrapped in sheer white lace. The wrinkled dress was caked under the arms with dried perspiration, the sagging pantyhose torn at the knees and spotted with urine⁵.

Mirror plays a significant role in this novel. In an interview with Toni Morrison, Naylor states:

I actually invented a mirror, for her after she had gone through all her experience. After she had dug up the remnants of the other Nedeed Women, I created a way for her to see her own reflection in a pan of water because she had no self up until that moment. And when she realized that she had a face, then maybe she had other things going for her as well, and she could take her destiny in her own hands.⁴

7. Revitalizing Her self

When Willa enters the kitchen, she accepts fully the truths of her life with all her faults; she recognizes who she is and where she has been and takes charge of where she is going to march ahead. She realizes and determines that nothing would prevent her from setting her life in order. She undergoes a rebirth, “an unconscious journey towards the power of will”⁵ thereby reasserting her rights. Willa’s mournful cry puts Willie on his spiritual quest. This seems to Catherine Ward, “Willie passes through Linden Hills and like Dante, analyzes the moral failure of the lost souls he encounters. By the time Willie escapes from the frozen lake at the bottom of Linden Hills and crosses to the safety of a nearby apple orchard, he has experienced a spiritual awakening”⁶. The final section of the novel illumines the nature of the responsibilities of Willa, “...Now that she had actually seen and accepted reality, and reality brought such a healing calm. For whatever it was worth, she could rebuild”⁵. Her persistence to confront Luther with her child’s corpse whose paternity has been refuted by Luther is the first move towards the defeat of Luther. She in order to prove her will to her husband declare thus: “Luther, your son is dead”⁵.

Willa proceeds to clean the kitchen. Luther touches her and blocks her path since she is not responding to his calls. “That brought them face-to-face. He had never encountered the eyes of a lone army ant, marching in defiance of falling rocks and rushing water along the great Amazon”⁵. Then he tries to push her down into a chair which is positioned towards the kitchen which leads to the basement door, and the door opens. “She had cleaned those rooms, every cell in her body strained against his hands and he found himself being pulled toward the hall”⁵. At last he reaches for the child, the moment “his fingers touched the wrapped body she locks all the three –herself, Luther and the child in a fatal embrace and the three were welded together”⁵. In their struggle they brush against a fireplace and the trail of an old bridal veil, which is wrapped around the child’s body, catches fire. “The trailing veil brushed and ember, the material curling and shrinking as orange sparks raced up its fine weave”⁵. Willa and Luther are together destroyed, along with the child, in a flash fire that sweeps the entire house, which is evident of Willa’s triumph and victory. Similarly, Willie’s and Lester’s conversation in the last page of the novel reveals some sense of hope. Willa has put an end to the legacy of Nedeed family and motivates Willie to ensue his spiritual odyssey wherever it leads him. When Willie tries to seek help from the residents of Tupelo Drive, he realizes that the residents are not ready to save him and allow Luther’s house to burn, a gesture of utter inhumanity.

There was silence until Willie told the biting wind, “They it burn, Shit. Yeah. Silence again. Suddenly, Lester stopped walking. But they let it burn, White. ‘Yeah.’ ... *They let it burn* Each with his own thoughts, they approached the chain fence, illuminated by a full moon just slipping toward the point over the horizon that signaled midnight. Hand anchored to hand, one helped the other to scale the open links. Then, they walked out of Tupelo Drive into the last days of the year⁵.

Willie indicts the resident’s apparent indifference to the fire accident but Lester suggests that their apathy constitutes recognition of the need for the destructive fire. Nedeed’s house, the centre of Linden Hills, alone is destroyed by the fire, it leaves some hope that the Linden Hills, may be transformed and freed from its Satanic headship. Through the human bond between Willie and Lester, Naylor intends to suggest some sense of hopefulness. *Linden Hills* pricks the conscience of the readers and kindles the awareness on the hidden cost of their choices in life.

8. Conclusion

Therefore, like Dante's journey through hell, Willie's journey through Linden Hills gives him increasingly horrifying visions of the barrenness and fraudulence of the residents' lives. Before he begins his journey, he echoes that he has perhaps erred in the choices he has made, that perhaps the people who live in Linden Hills represent a better way of life. But by the end of his journey, his glances into their lives have muted such questions. Although he must certainly enter adulthood, the course he chooses will not be the pursuit of the American dream of material success. The material success of the African-Americans in this novel is identified with that of the white culture and its high-powered quest leads to the destruction of the human soul. A part of that destruction for the African Americans who pursue this white dream is the loss of their ethnicity. As Nedeed realizes, the material success does not reflect the color of those who achieve it and yet such success simply reflects itself. Thus this intertextual reading conveys the message that the underlying concept of the numerous allegorical meanings in Naylor's narrative is the death of the (Black) human soul evoked by pursuit of the (White) American dream of material prosperity.

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