# Millennials in South Africa: Fiction, Media Representations and the need to Displace Otherness and Occupy History

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## Abstract

Fiction can often serve as a vehicle that addresses dominant cultures in a way that mitigates or displaces assumptions about that culture. However, it remains important that fiction is read in its real-world context in order to understand and explore the issues being addressed. Lily Herne's two publications, *Deadlands* and *Death of a Saint,* displace millennial Otherness in a way that enacts the culture as manifested in South Africa. Not only could this serve as a means to explore the crises related to protests that occupied real and virtual spaces, but also as a means to develop new ways of conceptualising accountability and responsibility during acts of resistance.

**Keywords:** zombie literature; Otherness; media representations; accountability; violence; protest

## Introduction

Despite the fundamental aim to rebel against a real or perceived oppressor and incite revolution, as characterised in Sherman's reflection on *The Rebel* (2009), protest and activism are often caught within dialectic patterns of power that ultimately serve to maintain the status quo (Fanon 1970; Langa n.d, 22; Postma 2016). These patterns of power do not only exist in theory or philosophy, as Sherman would suggest, or as part of some distant past, but they are real and enduring; tangible, even. Overcoming this entanglement and moving through the world on one's own terms is the legacy of Black Consciousness, an enduring movement that every student and intellectual in South Africa inherited, in one way or another, from organisations like the South African Students Congress (SASO) and their founding members.

In 2015, students all over South Africa seemingly took up arms against their respective institutions; physically demolishing remnants of the colonial, racialised pasts they could not escape and took to the web to voice their protests in an online movement that later came to be known by the hash tag #FeesMustFall. All this was precipitated by an earlier movement that went by the hash tag #RhodesMustFall, an initiative started at the University of Cape Town (UCT). Chumani Maxwele, who was accused of pointing his middle finger at Former President Jacob Zuma's blue-light motorcade, and subsequently arrested, claimed to have grown tired with the institutionalised violence against black bodies. His arrest was a breaking point that eventually led to the desecration and removal of a monument to Cecil John Rhodes at UCT. This, in turn, led to the nationwide protest against increases in tuition fees, which students, predominantly those of colour, could barely afford (Ray 2016). These protests had two components: a physical, FeesMustFall, which often led to violent confrontations between students and police; as well as an online component, #FeesMustFall, which enabled students to produce knowledge and awareness in alternate ways that were largely dependent on a virtual presence (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013). Almost immediately, established academics—notably black academics—became entwined in the discourse. Desiree Lewis (2015, 5) concluded: "It is tempting to see this battle for new truths within knowledge euphorically and optimistically. Yet like all struggles for the new, it is fraught, painful and difficult." So, what is new? What are we, African millennials, fighting so hard for?

One truth that remains evident is that collaboration, accountability, and unwavering responsibility are key to untangling the web of power that entraps so many students and academics in a minefield of corporatised coloniality. However, who should be accountable to whom? Which partnerships and collaborations will give the survivors of institutionalised oppression the best fighting chance? The youth of South Africa had to rely on the history of the Black Consciousness Movement, which grew out of the need for self-determination and militarisation, to create a movement that came to embody its own ideals. Badat (1999, 275) acknowledges that that early student-led organisations had no formal structure—they emerged out of a need shared by marginalised students:

> … there was no formal or explicit training provided around meeting procedures and the chairing of meetings, general administrative and financial matters, and planning programmes, meetings and campaigns.

Even at its roots, the student movement in South Africa is, by definition, unencumbered by formal organisational structure and instead, was born out of a shared sense of purpose. This grassroots character transpired into the 21st century when the hash tag #FeesMustFall started trending late in 2015 and a national movement that also gained some international attention (Mkhize and Neophytou 2015; Pather 2016) emerged. This eventually led to formal engagement with attempts to renegotiate coloniality (Ethridge 2018). The nature of this attention was different, depending on the source, and embodied different approaches to freedom and responsibility in the media. Christians (2015, 44)

states that "the freedom-responsibility nexus communicates a philosophy of news in parochial terms. For constructive dialogue between the Global South and North America/Western Europe, it needs to be replaced by international conceptions that communicate from a level playing field, without creating dependency." In South Africa, freedom and responsibility often appear to be taken as relaying the facts without accounting for the context it perpetuates and assumes a cold "objectivity" when it comes to context. For international audiences, however, accountability seems to rest mostly on accounting for the context in which it existed. Displacing this context into fiction can help us understand the structures that informed the youthful protestors that led to the #FeesMustFall and the related FeesMustFall phenomena.

One such example of fiction, capable of bridging the gap between the contexts from which the protests emerged and the network of accountability that needs to develop, would be Lily Herne's *Mall Rats* series. The fiction draws on tropes of consumerism and Otherness to displace and disrupt notions of self and Other. In turn, this offers a view from which a sense of relational responsibility could emerge. The implication for this would be that new relations of power can be explored, and that accountability can take on previously unexplored meanings in various contexts.

## History and Being a Millennial in South Africa

In 2010, the Pew Research Project determined that millennials were born between 1984 and 1992, and that one defining characteristic of the group is that "[d]espite struggling (and often failing) to find jobs in the teeth of a recession, about nine in ten either say that they currently have enough money or that they will eventually meet their long-term financial goals." Therefore, at least in this context, millennials are either hopelessly deluded, or remarkably optimistic, with nothing in between. In South Africa, however, race seems to remain a significant political dimension related directly to poverty. In *Stylizing the Self: The Y Generation in Rosebank, Johannesburg,* Sarah Nuttall (2009, 28) defines Generation Y (used interchangeably with millennials) as the generation of South African youths who "remake the past in very specific ways in the services of the present and the future." Furthermore, she also notes that this generation consists of those who attended racially mixed schools as well as those who have attended "exclusively black township schools." This is important because it speaks to the different classes of education that existed in the country for the last three decades. Under apartheid, each race was assigned a different department of education based on what type of education was believed to be most suited for them. However, in 1997, the Mandela government restructured the departments so that they were classified according to province instead and aimed to "purge the apartheid curriculum (school syllabuses) of racially offensive and outdated content" (Jansen 1998, 321). Other significant changes also included the introduction of continuous assessment (CA) which stipulated that "assessment should be both informal and formal" and continue throughout each year until the learner completes grade 12 (National Protocol for Assessment). So, even at school, students of this generation were acutely impacted by the deliberate efforts made, at least in public

schools, to mitigate the effects of generations of segregated education based on the apartheid government's racially segregated education. In terms of the Private School Act of 1986, however, "[t]he Head of Education may at his discretion grant or refuse an application … but he shall not grant any application if he is of the opinion that the private school does not comply with the prescribed requirements" (Government Gazette, para. 15 no. 4), which means private schools were accountable directly to the ministry for the education they provide, and were often required to permit non-white children into their schools in order to comply with the definition of a private school as one who has more than 20 pupils (Government Gazette, para. 25). Thus, the distinction between private and public education in South Africa became one that would, along with the culture jamming and mixing that characterised millennials, significantly impact the course of education and protest in the country. Nuttall (2009) differentiates between the global and the South African youth, who are the first to be exposed exclusively to post-apartheid rhetoric and technologies such as the internet simultaneously, which enabled high speed global sharing and communication. The impact of technology on protest was almost immediate—as Castells reiterated in 2010:

> The shift from traditional mass media to a system of horizontal communication networks organized around the Internet and wireless communication has introduced a multiplicity of communication patterns at the source of a fundamental cultural transformation, as virtuality becomes an essential dimension of our reality. The constitution of a new culture based on multimodal communication and digital information processing creates a generational divide between those born before the Internet Age and those who grew up being digital. (Castells 2010, xviii)

Nowhere in South Africa has this zeitgeist of the Internet Age been captured as well as it has been in Lily Herne's *Deadlands* or *Mall Rats* series, where the Otherness is created in an apocalyptic wasteland invaded by zombies that embody the simultaneous fear of and obligation to re-enact history. Notably, as Barendse (2015) states, in this series, zombies are not the enemy, but rather "are pawns in a power struggle between the human survivors of the apocalypse and the Guardians" (Barendse 2015, 82). The series starts out in a zombie-infested Cape Town, where Lele, recently relocated from the rural "Agriculturals," attends her grandmother's funeral and starts school at Malema High. Already, the themes start emerging—new beginnings, education, death of an earlier generation. Davis (2017, 45) argues:

> The version of South Africa found in *Deadlands* is an already decayed state, a post-cataclysmic country after a mysterious event resulted in a zombie invasion of South Africa. Inequalities between the grossly wealthy state representatives and the abject poverty of the voting public remain, but are fictionalised, and therefore made apparent without engaging directly in state conflicts.

The fiction allows a certain kind of distance from what would otherwise be an abominable thing to look at; a situation in which citizens are at the mercy of immense structures that dictate their lives, and even though these are visible, citizens need to face

the possibility of being powerless to change anything. In this sense, the violence that characterised the FeesMustFall movement was almost a relief, as it exposed the festering wounds that rest on fairly visible power structures.

The series often self-consciously generates the need for a layered reading in its deliberate references to South African politics, necessary to displace trauma and romanticised liberation ideals; names like Malema High and ANZ, for example parodies iconic figures like Julius Malema and the ANC (African National Congress) and the protagonists often exist as two separate but interlinked individuals like "Saint" and "Ntombi," each of which occupies the same body but has distinct ways of relating to the world. Such a layered reading (Graham 2009; Nuttall 2009) extends to the physical landscape and demonstrates the importance of industry and universities, and the towns that developed around them as colonial spaces in South Africa that have come to be occupied by, among others, black millennial bodies. For instance, in *Death of a Saint* (Herne 2012, 234) the narrative goes:

> This town is anything but untouched. Behind a sagging fence cobbled together from rusted metal, wood and coils of spiked wire, I can just about make out a cluster of once-imposing red-roofed buildings and the top of a boxy clock tower. The bushes and plants in front of them are scorched skeletons, and soot stains the walls above the few windows that are visible.

Given the journey undertaken from Cape Town to Johannesburg, readers will likely associate this landmark with Grahamstown, one of the few cities that maintained their original names in the series (for comparison, the popular Johannesburg destination, Sandton, is renamed Sandtown). The town is, in reality, the site of Rhodes University, which was established in the early 1900s through state and corporate interventions (University, Rhodes 2019). This was well before the segregation of universities in 1959. Entangled in this choice of setting then, is the historical, corporate and political meanings associated with spaces that have since become occupied by millennials in a way that locates the millennial body within a history that "added blacks" to existing institutions (Rasethaba 2019).

Even as part of our decolonisation process, however, there remains the constant victim/survivor complex when students see themselves as peddlers of an ideology that has spread well beyond history. In other words: when all you have is a hammer, everything is a nail. A history grounded in violent protest is the hammer that students relied on more than others, which serves to maintain the cycle of oppression. In an interview with Godfrey Maringira and Simarashe Gukurume (n.d., 44), one student said:

> If you push a mouse into a corner it will jump or even bite you. So students have been pushed into the corner, and they are jumping and fighting back. This is black pan-Africanism; we are going to fight for this revolution to happen. We come from townships and big politicians have been lying to us.

Violence pervaded this research, and the authors went as far as saying "[t]he research took place in a context where violence had been enacted by the state, armed police and private security personnel" (Maringira and Gukurume 2017, 34), calling to mind familiar images of the Marikana massacre in 2012 and student protests in the late 1960s, where violence between protestors and police became the norm. While such violent encounters are part of protesting in South Africa, this is not the only mode available to millennials, who negotiate and remix different modes of resisting just as they incorporate struggle iconography in their day-to-day activities (Nuttall 2009). The #FeesMustFall movement proved this when activism took on digital forms ranging from tweets to documentaries that extended to an international audience. This means that it is possible for protest to exist in South Africa without the need for a victim/perpetrator dynamic, especially when moving beyond what is physical.

## Bridging Physical and Digital Spaces Responsibly and with Accountability

For the millennial, everything is physical, as the body becomes a site to enact the self and to resist. As the student in Maringira and Gukurume's research said: "*This is black pan-Africanism.*" Adam Haupt (2017) asserts that in a different case that also occurred in the Western Cape and took on the city's prioritisation of corporate and private property rights over citizenship, corporate monopolisation and state censorship posed a very real threat to democracy. When the activist collective, Tokolosh, spray-painted messages about the corporatisation of democracy on a sculpture that was partially funded by a private corporation initially meant to "[allude] to the intense disparity between the way we view the world and the way the world views us," the piece took on new meaning. Ray-Ban partially funded the project and the artist approached the Nelson Mandela Foundation to politicise the image (Ray-Ban Mandela 2014). The act of "vandalising" the sculpture with spray paint and the city's prioritisation of corporate access to the space enacted the ways in which private citizenship necessarily curtailed individual rights in favour of corporate ones. Haupt (2017, 147) explains:

> The by-law effectively criminalises hip-hop graffiti artists, culture jammers and political activists who rely on Section 16 of the Constitution, which enshrines free speech rights, to produce counterhegemonic messages. [Private security companies hired by the city to protect their interests] effectively become "by-law bobbies" who function with the "broken windows" hypothesis which, in short, posits that any signs of disorder in a neighbourhood, such as broken windows that have not been fixed, graffiti, abandoned buildings and litter will invariably undercut systems of social control and "tip" the neighbourhood from a low-crime to a high-crime area.

For protestors, this means that their rights under Section 16 of the Constitution, Freedom of Expression (Constitution of South Africa, sec. 16) are curtailed by local by-laws that favour corporate interests. The broken windows hypothesis, originally developed by James Q. Wilson, Professor of Government at Harvard and author of *Thinking About Crime,* and George Lee Kelling from the University of Newark (Wilson and Kelling

1982), posits that "[t]he citizen who fears the ill-smelling drunk, the rowdy teenager, or the importuning beggar is not merely expressing his distaste for unseemly behaviour; he is also giving voice to a bit of folk wisdom that happens to be a correct generalisation—namely, that serious street crime flourishes in areas in which disorderly behaviour goes unchecked." This means that for proponents of this hypothesis, even small incursions on the norm cannot go unchecked. For the universities trying to protect their assets, this means keeping disorderly students in check by any means necessary, regardless of the extent to which they are causing trouble—firing a rubber bullet at a student who broke a window or tagged a wall is justified. For the student trying to resist what they deem to be an oppressive capitalist system derived from the colonial structures put in place centuries ago, defacing a building or monument is justified because doing so represents a step toward inclusion. This dynamic inevitably results in an increasingly aggressive power struggle between two parties, both of whom perceive violence as necessary and justified. This "broken windows" policing is often applied and theorised in relation to police brutality in the United States, where it is not uncommon to understand black bodies as having been increasingly brutalised because of their blackness and the stereotypes associated with that body (Kamalu and Onyeozili 2018), but also as the result of multiple layers of Otherness that range from body weight, dis/ability, and gender to mental health and socio-economic status (Hitchens 2017). Therefore, by imposing this theory on the bodies and psyches of emerging or potential African scholars, they become entangled in a cycle of violence that they also need to break or escape; they become responsible and accountable for their own role in history as that history seeks to maintain itself. Even in the most peaceful, contemplative times, the threat of violence and the fear thereof always exist in South Africa, and living without such fear, or even the possibility thereof, seems almost alien. It is this fear of re-enacting history and the apparent inescapability of Otherness, that the millennial—both in the Global North and South—can overcome by embracing the collapse of boundaries rather than attempting to impose what now seems to be irrelevant structures on millennial bodies.

For Jerrold Hogle (2002, 5), beneath the tangle of contradictions rests "the terror or possible horror that ruination of older powers will haunt us all"; and it is this fundamental terror that resists or even controls and directs change. The zombie is the perfect metaphor for the ruination, or rather remixing of traditional forms and modes that are threatened by rapid changes in the available cultural idiom, which would include rapid technological advances and the use of social media as a means to organise protest. Bishop (2010) notes that approximately during the first decade of the millennium, the zombie has developed in a way that embodies the fear of the ruination of postcolonial society, as seen in pivotal films like *I walked with a Zombie,* that challenges the enslavement of the Caucasian, female body and enslaved black body. The zombie also lends itself to an interpretation of the anxieties associated with hybridity as, traditionally, these creatures are not entirely human or non-human. In *Deadlands,* however, the importance of the millennial body is made clear when the primary group clashes with a group of their peers who have been turned into guardians—a class of

zombie that we later learn has been severed from the remnants of its memory and humanity, and controls movement within and between the various human settlements. After Lele's first love interest, Thabo, is fatally injured, she pleads with and is disarmed by Paul, another guardian:

> "What do you mean help Thabo. How?"
>
> "How do you think, Lele? He can become one of us, as we had planned."
>
> "What? No!"
>
> "Then he will die," Paul said, again in that same lifeless tone. He waved his hand towards the shop doorway. "And he will join the dead ones" [who he previously mentioned are like slaves to the Guardians].
>
> "Because you're … you're monsters!" it was the only word I could come up with right then to describe them. What else *were* the Guardians?
>
> "It's not us who are the monsters, Lele."
>
> "What do you mean by that?"
>
> Paul laughed his empty laugh. … "We are not the ones filled with hate." (Herne 2011, 284–5)

By justifying his stance with a reference to hate, its bipolar opposite love, for Paul and Lele it becomes a duty and responsibility toward the Other.

The introduction of an undead Other in *Deadlands,* in the South African context, meant that millennial anxieties—not only around race and gendered oppression, but also the role of the body in resisting that Other—are exposed in a less threatening form than the reality of shots being fired into crowds or bodies being dragged off into police vehicles (not to mention the thought of what could happen once they have been arrested). It allowed the millennials to know themselves through the Other. When Lele "wins" the lottery that requires youths to become part of the undead in *Deadlands* (Herne 2011), she escapes and comes across a mountain of rotting flesh and discovers a secret (other than herself, in this case) that the government has been using to regulate the population in the enclave and manage the undead:

> To describe what I was seeing as "grotesque" or "horrific" would be a serious understatement. The hillock was a huge sprawling pile of bones and skulls. Thousands upon thousands of them. And it appeared to be moving.
>
> Filled with a horrible fascination I edged closer, making sure that I kept out of sight. I could make out a few tufts of rotten material stuck in amongst the bones, and as I made my way down the slope I realised why I'd thought the pile was moving, slippery tendrils

of white stuff—what Saint had called spaghetti—were snaking around the skulls and body parts.

This moment of horror was, for Lele, a breaking point in which she realised that she had not yet discovered her own entanglement with these creatures and the process by which they come into being. Davis (2017, 79) argues that "Lele's 'horrible fascination' with the heap of corpses suggests that, at that moment, she is confronted with the symbolic figure of her own death, or her own consumption by the spaghetti parasite." Suddenly, she too could become a monster and it is only by knowing this, that she could resist. For Larsen, "[the Other's] presence cannot be explained away as a mechanism for reintegrating social tension through fear [as it is in *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*]. It is a strange, tragicomic monster that displaces evil and its concept: the zombie is not evil, nor has it been begot by evil; it is a monstrosity that deflects itself in order to show that our imagination cannot stop at the monster." This means that through knowing the Other, Lele could empower herself with the tools she needed to resist.

It is, therefore, only through knowing the Other, or knowing of the Other and acting with them in mind, that the trajectory of violence can be changed. This, for TeKawehau Hoskins, Betsan Martin, and Maria Humphries (2011) is the power of relational responsibility. Drawing on Levina's concept of the formulation of subjectivity as an experience directly related to the existence of another, the authors suggest that only through a selfless sense of duty toward and responsibility for the Other, is it possible for sustainability. Of course, as Mouffe (2002) maintains, such selfless responsibility toward the other is impossible within democratic spheres, as there is no singular focus. This was exemplified in the FeesMustFall movement in the overlap between aspects like language, diversity, gender and sexual orientation; and is in fact embedded in the manifesto when the movement attempted to address a range of issues related to coloniality. As some commentators said from within the decolonisation: "You cannot talk about racism or white supremacy without talking about power" and "the patriarchy within white supremacy hasn't been touched" (Rasethaba 2019). These different arenas for the embodiment of power overlap and in a democracy, each needs to be given due diligence, and therefore none can be treated with unwavering responsibility at the expense of another. In order to address this, Hoskins, Martin, and Humphries (2011) suggest that it is only through collaboration as "friendly enemies" that a responsible exchange can take place and discourses can be allowed to overlap with one another despite tension. So, even when priorities are different, some common ground can be discovered and explored in ways that can enact visible change. Collaboration between the Global North and South, for both Anthea Garman (2015, and Clifford Christians (2015), seems to be the answer to developing new modes of accountability in the media. Garman states the importance that in the South, one "can never forget that most of the theory we use did not come out of Africa, that much of it has ambiguous histories of alliance with colonial power, and that we are always bending it—even if a little—to suit our own uses and situations. Tension and plurality are necessary in order to negotiate previously unimagined meanings" (Garman 2015, 170). This means that the very

reliance on concepts like Otherness and accountability can only take us so far—viewing power as something that only comes from or acts upon is already problematic and, if Garman is to be believed, a limited way to read African texts. These concepts cannot be transferred directly out of Northern scholarship to the South; they need to be remixed.

## The Media

Much like media representations that emphasised violent reactions to law enforcement in Bulgaria, which notably forms part of the Global North, aimed to control protesting bodies there in terms of the existing ontological framework (Gueorguieva 2015, 40); in South Africa, students felt that these representations suppressed their call for decolonisation despite their efforts to address specific areas for change in a legitimate, publicised manifesto (UCT Movement Rhodes Must Fall Mission Statement 2015) that outlines precisely what authorities had to address. This means that in spite of efforts taken to ensure that protests would be aimed effectively at Westernised institutions on their terms, the voices of students had to be included somehow. Often this manifested as violence and excessive behaviour when subjected to the ontological frameworks within which the South African media operated. This dialogue between North and South is a significant one because it illustrates that, unlike one that is contained in separate arenas, it will facilitate the negotiation of new, equal relationships of power.

Not only did the impact of technology (that was not available to students protesting under apartheid regimes) result in the rapid proliferation of the hash tag #FeesMustFall, as Lewis claimed, but it also enabled students to generate knowledge in their own space and on their own terms (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013, x); it branded the movement and led to the formation of an ad hoc public (Saxton et al. 2015, 156) that simultaneously existed in physical and digital spaces. In short, the #FeesMustFall movement and even the physical protests that resulted from them were, from the start, radically different from the movements of yesteryear that were based in similar ideologies. In many ways, however, the South African media perpetuated discourse of violence by focusing on reporting events with noticeably less emphasis on the motivations behind the violence and crowd interactions, despite existing in channels that facilitate more interaction than the traditional printed newspaper (Castells 2010). South African media historically contributed toward what Giroux (2011, 36) would later describe as "a culture of fear and suspicion [toward students and other minorities who] fall prey to unprecedented levels of displaced resentment from the media, public scorn for their vulnerability" by emphasising violent actions during protests, thereby compacting the disenfranchisement of already isolated protestors. In South Africa, however, resisting such representations often included the media who "neither romanticised the rural nor condemned the moral degradation of the cities, contributing to a new tradition of writing which focused on black experience in the South African city" (Nutall 2009, 34). It is this experience, along with the constitutional obligations of the media, that places the media in the centre of both resisting and maintaining history. At the height of the protests, which culminated in a march on the South African Parliament in Cape Town in October 2016, some

headlines read: "AS IT HAPPENED: #FeesMustFall—Fire at Rhodes as students, police clash" (16 October 2016 15:00); "AS IT HAPPENED: Students arrested as fee protests continue" (18 October 2016); "Cars torched at UCT campus" (25 October 2016); "Calm restored at Union Buildings following #FeesMustFall march" (20 October). Glaring emphasis on description and their implications aside, headlines like these were not uncommon in the South African media, in contrast to their international counterparts who often emphasised the motivation behind the actions in headlines like: "Students in South Africa Protest the Slow Pace of Change" (Onishi 2019).

## Conclusion

While the paper ends with a brief comparison between how the local and international media portrayed students—their actions and purposes—limiting this discussion was a deliberate choice that emphasises the experience of the South African youth. It is necessary to look North in order to understand what is "Other," but also in order to overcome it and to negotiate new ways of conceptualising resistance. Lily Herne's fiction, *Deadlands,* provides a lens to view the ways in which fiction, and in particular, the zombie, is able to achieve this. The zombie was a particularly effective metaphor because it displaces Otherness and, in the South African context, demonstrates the ways in which millennials resist and engage with alterity. By displacing Otherness then, new spaces in which to negotiate change can develop and the constant dichotomy of self/Other need not be the only arena in which to exist and resist. It is through knowing the Other and negotiating modes of existence within that space, that alternate selves can emerge. This is particularly relevant to protestors in South Africa, who by reiterating the discourses of resistance that originated the culture of protest in the country, perpetuate it.

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