

Frances De Groen: Healing, Wholeness and Holiness in 'My Place'

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The notion of social healing has been an important element in the critical reception of *My Place*. Several reviews have highlighted the book's educational impact and how it might benefit future generations.¹ Joy Hooton asserts that 'no document has a greater chance of challenging the cult of forgetfulness than a black woman's autobiography'² while Judith Brett discusses how a book like *My Place* which provides testimony to the unspeakable suffering perpetrated on Aboriginal people might offer a way out of the impasse of white guilt. To hide or deny the mistakes and wrongdoings of the past perpetuates guilt and this means that 'relations between whites and Aborigines remain frozen in a racist framework of master and victim'.³ Brett suggests that by admitting to the mistakes and crimes committed as a result of the colonisation process we can make progress towards creating a more equitable, non-racist society.

Sally Morgan sees *My Place* as having the potential to change people's attitudes to questions of race relations in Australia. Although originally conceived as a family history for her children, the project developed in scope and her research into archival information concerning the Aboriginal experience in Western Australia intensified. It then became clear that the book should be directed to a much wider audience. That it has reached so many readers pleases Morgan, who says that she came to see the journey of self-discovery as a means of 'educating kids who were growing up so that they had a better understanding of Aboriginal people'.⁴ Her remarks make it plain that she envisaged a wide multicultural audience rather than either an exclusively white or Aboriginal readership. She holds that 'regardless of what your background is, whether it's Irish or Italian or Aboriginal, it's good to know where you come from, where you fit into a particular culture, who your relatives are'.⁵

Clearly Sally Morgan believes in the importance of knowing one's background in order to gain a fulfilling sense of identity. To be prevented from knowing these things can lead to confusion about who you are and where you belong. Such confusion can produce deep unhappiness and despair and, in extreme cases, can lead to acts of violence. The importance of establishing these crucial facts about origins and background as a basis for gaining an adequate sense of personal identity has only recently been acknowledged. Adopted children can now gain access to information about their natural parents where previously they were denied this right. Agencies like LINK UP have been organised to help reunite Aboriginal families broken up and displaced by government regulations.

The recovery of the lost or suppressed aspects of personal identity can be a healing process, as *My Place* so movingly documents. Like some forms of psychotherapy it involves the passage from silence about troubling experiences to story. Morgan suggests that only by articulating and shaping one's memories in the form of a story (one's life story) can psychic wholeness be achieved. We see this healing process at work in the lives of Sally, Gladys and Nan as the narrative unfolds. But Bill Milroy, who is unable to tell his own story—we hear it pieced together second hand from Gladys—cannot be healed of the traumas he underwent during the Second World War. In psychological terms, when suffering is denied or repressed it continues to affect the person trying to forget. Memories may be buried but they are not dead. Secrets, of the traumatic kind harboured by Nan and Bill, are destructive. The sheereffort to repress them distorts and cripples the sufferer's life in the present. Nan tells Sally: 'It makes me sick to talk about the past' (161). However, as the book draws to its conclusion we come to realise that *not* talking about the past is the real problem. Sally's plea, 'Don't you see, Nan, someone's got to tell. Otherwise things will stay the same, they won't get any

better' (319) suggests that the sharing of an individual's story with a wide audience can have a socially beneficial effect.

John Colmer⁶ points out in his sensitive discussion of *My Place* that the underlying structural principle of Morgan's narrative is the contrast between silence and speech. In the following reading of *My Place* I would like to extend this approach to the narrative structure in relation to the motif (or idea) of healing, so central to the critical reception of Morgan's book. Breaking the silence, moving from silence to speech, becomes a healing process in the lives of Sally and her immediate family. Reading *My Place* involves us imaginatively in this same process of renewal. The book's redemptive power lies in the way it makes the experience of the characters' psychic healing available to the reader. We are forced to confront the suffering and the redemption of the Aboriginal characters from their own point of view. For those of us who are not Aboriginal this is an ambivalent experience. As human beings we identify with Arthur, Gladys and Daisy and feel the injustice and cruelty of their suffering. But at the same time we realise that through our history we are implicated in the root cause of that suffering: the imposition of our white civilisation on their land and culture. We stand accused and come to see Australian history, and hence contemporary Australian society, in a more critical way. *My Place* may not demand land rights in a noisy and vehement way. Nevertheless, through the critique of white injustice and inhumanity implicit in the life stories of its central characters, it forces white readers to see the vital importance of making reparations to heal the wounds of the past.

It is therefore not surprising that references to health and illness, healing and the failure to heal, recur so persistently throughout the text; nor that associations should begin to develop, linking the ideas of healing, wholeness and holiness. (The *Macquarie Dictionary* reveals that these associations are traditional: modern English 'heal' and 'holy' both derive from the Old English 'hal' which means whole.) The central characters can all be examined in terms of their progress towards or away from psychic wholeness and spiritual awareness. Settings, too, are represented as wholesome or unhealthy, sacred or profane: the hospital represents the most alienating and unhealthy environment in the narrative while the natural settings of the swamp and Corunna Downs afford a healing serenity and spiritual peace.

A close consideration of the chain of images associated with the motif of healing suggests that the structure turns upon a pattern of contrasts between, on the one hand, wholeness, health, holiness and Aboriginal Christian spirituality, and on the other a lack of wholeness (loss, dispersal, fragmentation), disease or impairment, a secular or profane approach to life and Western rationalism. These contrasts can be aligned with the central structural contrast between speech and silence noted by Colmer. As the narrative unfolds we see that silence and secrecy are associated with disease, disharmony and oppression. Speech and openness lead to wholeness of being (physical and psychic health) and personal freedom.

We can trace these contrasts in the lives of the protagonists. Arthur, who although uninitiated, never denies his Aboriginality, emerges as the most psychically robust of all the characters. When Nan tries to insult him by calling him a 'silly old blackfella' he replies: 'Aah, you'll have to think of a better name than that to call me ... I'm proud of being a blackfella. Anyway, you're a blackfella yourself, what do ya thing about that' (147). He never uses the name of Drake-Brockman to protect himself within the white community but calls himself Arthur Corunna after his birthplace. There is no mention of any physical impairment in his story except for the momentary blindness he registers as a sign that his beloved mother had died (207). In the narrative this moment of physical impairment signifies Arthur's spiritual power and connection with his Aboriginal heritage rather than anything unhealthy or negative. He lives well into his nineties and consciously approaches death with confidence and peace.

Arthur is noteworthy for his strong sense of personal identity and pride. His physical strength mirrors this psychic wholeness and helps him to resist the discriminatory actions of his white employers so that ultimately he becomes a landowner with some status in the white community. It is important to realise here that Arthur's robust masculinity, a valued commodity in the male-dominated Australian society of his era, contributes towards his relative success within the white community. He is admired and respected for his physique and his boxing prowess. In this regard he is more fortunate than his sister Daisy whose femininity is a liability. To be black was to be oppressed and exploited, as Arthur certainly was both economically and socially, but to be black and female was to be doubly oppressed. Arthur was not subjected to the sexual exploitation many Aboriginal women, including Daisy, experienced.

Arthur's vision of himself and of his experience bridges the worlds of black and white just as the shape of his story, replete though it is with Aboriginal experience, conforms to what Narogin and other critics identify as an essentially 'white' narrative form, 'the battler genre': 'poor underprivileged person through the force of his or her own character, makes it to the top through own efforts'.⁷ Arthur does not reject white culture outright. Rather he values education and Christianity while at the same time maintaining contact with his Aboriginal roots. He has a special relationship with wildlife (181 and 212) and with the land, both on Corunna Downs and his farm at Muckinbudin, and he sees no contradiction between Aboriginal spiritual traditions and Christian notions of God and heaven. The 'healing powers' he believes he has inherited from his 'boolyah men' ancestors (176 and 213) to pass down to future generations are seen to come from 'above', from God, 'the best mate a man can have'. But he is critical of the continuing colonialism in Australia and speaks out strongly against it (212).

Bill Milroy, the most unhealthy, fragmented and profane character in the narrative, provides a marked contrast to Arthur. As a young man reared in a dissolute environment by racist parents, Bill was 'wild' and self-destructive (280). A veteran of the Second World War who survived a German torpedo attack, capture, torture, and life as a prisoner of war, Bill's remaining years are passed as a drunken invalid. His speech consists largely of swearing and violent abuse. Although initially accepting of Gladys's Aboriginal background he becomes racist, like his father and mother, and expresses this in his rejection of Nan as a 'bloody nigger' (347). While we are given glimpses of the man he might have been we mostly see Bill in connection with the hospital where he stays for longer and longer periods.

Our first impression of Bill is through Sally's childlike gaze: 'just a frame, that was Dad. The heart had gone out of him long ago' (12). A fuller picture is provided by Gladys who tells Bill's story. She sees in Bill a sensitivity emanating from the deep, instinctive spirituality which helped him survive the war despite his aversion to killing. This spirituality was progressively eroded by Bill's inability to come to terms with what he experienced at the hands of the Gestapo officer who tortured him and who, he is given reason to believe, has escaped to Australia. Bill can't fully disclose the content of the nightmares he suffers: 'there were some things that were too degrading for him to share' (282). After his nervous breakdown his paranoia increases to the point where he cannot distinguish nightmare from reality, Gladys from the Gestapo officer. Not even Gladys, who practises faith healing, can help him: 'I couldn't heal his mind, it was too damaged ... They'd broken his mind. He has a sensitive side to him, they'd destroyed that, degraded him. He couldn't get away from what was inside him. He couldn't escape from his own memories' (290). The only way Bill can achieve peace is through self-annihilation.

Sally's autobiography provides the occasion and the frame for the stories of Arthur, Gladys and Nan. Her determination to piece together the truth about her family's past eventually releases them from their imprisoning silence. Gradually Sally's quest involves them in a mutual struggle against the pain, fear and social vulnerability which their suppressed memories perpetuate. Her quest leads to the recovery of pride in their Aboriginal heritage while their stories further Sally's progress towards psychic integration.

The process of writing the book *My Place* restores both Sally's health and her wholeness. A sickly baby ['we nearly lost her a couple of times', (282)] who grows into a thin, withdrawn child, Sally feels alienated and uncomfortable outside her home environment. The rheumatic fever she contracts 'one year to the day' after her father's death, is diagnosed by doctors as 'growing pains' and ignored, but she recovers 'without medical intervention' through Nan's treatment (64). She feigns illness to avoid attending school, suffers from 'summer flu', and is thoroughly confused about herself and her future. She is afflicted with 'the feeling that a very vital part of me was missing and that I'd never belong anywhere. Never resolve anything' (106). Life as a young part-Aboriginal person in modern Australian society seems literally to make Sally ill. She contracts industrial acne through sensitivity to the chemicals her laboratory job requires her to handle (114). The reader at this point cannot help but see Sally's 'dis-ease' as due to her *unease* about who she is and where she comes from. For the reader, Sally's naive misinterpretation of schizophrenia as a type of nationality (114) has an ironic bearing on her cultural and psychic confusion at this point in the narrative.

Knowing that she comes of Aboriginal stock is not enough to provide Sally with a sense of wholeness of identity. She must find out the entire story of her background to understand what it means for her to be Aboriginal: 'I'd never lived off the land and been a hunter and a gatherer. I'd never participated in

corroborees or heard stories of the Dreamtime. I'd lived all my life in suburbia and told everyone I was Indian. I hardly knew any Aboriginal people. What did it mean for someone like me?' (141). The journey to Corunna Downs is crucial to Sally's insight into her Aboriginality. By meeting formerly unknown relatives and being welcomed into the kinship network, by treading on ancestral soil, she discovers her 'place' both within the extended family and in connection with tribal territory, with 'country'. 'We could have survived but not as a *whole* people. We would never have known our place' (233 and epigraph, my emphasis). The stories of her mother and grandmother further extend the meaning of her 'place'. But the full significance only comes after Nan's death when Sally hears the song of the 'Aboriginal bird', symbolic of Nan's spirit, in her heart.

It is noteworthy that from the moment when Sally decides to write a book recording the recovery of her Aboriginal background there is no further mention of confusion or recurrent ill health. The only other instance of illness is Sally's brief collapse while Nan is in the final stages of terminal cancer. This debility is represented as having a psychosomatic origin which suggests that Sally's spirit is so closely identified with Nan's that she too undergoes a process of dying: 'We all knew that something more than Nan's body was dying. She was a symbol. Part of us was going, too. We couldn't explain it. It was just a time none of us understood' (355).

Sally's quest is especially healing for Gladys who, advised by Nan, had denied her background out of fear that her family would be taken away from her. When Gladys accompanies Sally to the Corunna Downs district to renew contacts with Aboriginal kinfolk she feels transformed: 'All my life, I've only been half a person. I don't think I realised how much of me was missing until I came North' (233). Although Gladys continues to feel scared to admit her Aboriginal identity, by the end of the narrative she is able to say 'at least I've made a start. And I hope my children will be proud of the spiritual background from which they've sprung' (306).

Gladys had been sustained throughout her life by a strong spiritual awareness. As a teenager she would visit fortune tellers, much to the disgust of Nan who was only too conscious of the dangers of 'meddlin' with spirits': 'Blackfellas know all about spirits. We brought up with them. That's where the white man's stupid. He only believes what he can see. He needs to get educated. He's only livin' half a life' (344). Gladys's interest in the occult and her search for an appropriate church (62) is indicative both of an affiliation with her ancestral spiritual tradition and an unconscious motivation to achieve the wholeness which is also holiness.

In times of physical crisis Gladys experiences visions which provide comfort and confidence. She survives illness and birth complications because of her spiritual strength rather than through medical interventions, which, for the most part, prove to be incompetent. Her visions embody both Christian and Aboriginal associations. The apparition of a 'nun' guards Sally, as a baby, against sickness (282) and 'angels' hover in the room when Billy and David are born (292 and 297). Prior to David's difficult birth Gladys has a visitation from elders dressed in biblical robes who tell her that her lineage is ancient and that a great leader will be born into her house (295). While up North Gladys and Sally both see 'through a window in heaven' the figures of their dead female ancestors in what would appear to be a shared dream (227). Together with Nan she hears the 'Aboriginal' music from the swamp behind the Manning house (292). Like Arthur, Gladys is conscious of possessing healing powers and practises 'healing with the hands' at spiritualist meetings: 'Sometimes a person would be healed mentally, sometimes spiritually, sometimes physically. I would feel a power come into me, it would build up in my hands and then flow from me to whoever I touched. The power comes from God, it's a very positive thing. It's pure love, love for people' (301). But when it comes to her children Gladys prefers western treatment. Her dearest ambition is for one of her children to become a doctor (83 and 308).

For Nan, so cruelly exploited by the Drake-Brockman family, healing is a more difficult process than for her daughter. She has been made so frightened by her sufferings that although her Aboriginal heritage is very dear to her she denies any knowledge of it. Sally's quest encourages Nan to see herself differently. She begins to identify with oppressed black peoples all over the world (138) and to rediscover a pride in her culture, gradually sharing words from her tribal language with her great-grandchildren and telling them about bush tucker (318). Finally, by putting her painful memories into words she gains some control over the experiences of the past and achieves a measure of 'wholeness'. But there are some experiences (the loss of her first child and Gladys's conception) which remain too painful for disclosure. She is too scared and her

release from the prison of silence comes too late. Nevertheless she can demand that 'the government and the white man must own up to their mistakes' so that full equality between black and white can eventuate (349). Her imminent death becomes the catalyst for Jill's acceptance of her Aboriginality: 'When this is over ... I'm going to stand up and be counted' (354).

Nan's death from cancer can be read as a sign of her continuing 'disease' despite the progress she has made towards becoming a 'proud blackfella'. The secrets surrounding Gladys's birth and the forced relinquishing of another daughter are carried to her grave. However, the fact that Nan insists on dying in hospital so that the family home remains free of the associations of her death shows just how strong in spirit she has become. Doctors and hospitals had formerly signified for Nan the brutal power of white bureaucracy over vulnerable Aboriginal people. To go back to the hospital she had vowed never to enter again (315) is both an assertion of her Aboriginality and a testimony to her growing freedom from fear.

Nan's spiritual gifts are represented in the text as emanating from her Aboriginal ancestry. Unable to live openly as an Aboriginal person through fear of losing her daughter Gladys and also her grandchildren, Nan maintains a secret, silent connection with her past, expressing this aspect of her identity most vividly and openly in her attitudes to health and healing. Like Arthur she trusts in her family's powerful spirituality but cannot articulate this until just prior to her death: 'Now I tell you something, Sal, this is a sacred thing so I better speak quiet. I helped your mother with that polio. You see, our family's always had power that way' (346). Her unshakeable faith in the magic of the 'old cures' (pepper for wounds, beetroot for replacing lost blood, Enos for oxygenating the blood, kerosene as an embrocation, onions for warding off germs) had been rejected by the young Sally. Yet Nan's skin 'always healed soft and whole'. Her grandchildren, taken to Hollywood Hospital for their ills and injuries 'exhibited various higgledy-piggledy scars' (66).

This is not surprising, for in *My Place* the hospital, which signifies most completely the scientific western approach to health, is decidedly not a place of healing. Clinical and impersonal, the hospital represents a medical tradition which treats the body rather than the person, dehumanising the contact between the powerful medical expert and the vulnerable patient. For Nan especially, the experience of being at the mercy of medical authorities symbolises the oppression she has suffered all her life in the wider Australian community.

My Place begins with Sally's visit to her father in Hollywood Repatriation Hospital and comes full circle to another hospital where Nan dies. Both moments echo with bird song. The clinical, alienating environment of Hollywood Hospital is juxtaposed with the magic of the garden and the 'high trilling music' of Nan's 'special bird'. People like Bill Milroy, who suffer disorders of the mind or the spirit rather than physical complaints, cannot be healed here. Yet such victims are labelled malingerers, blamed for their continuing illness, and discriminated against by having repatriation entitlements delayed. Gladys's account of Bill's treatment paints the hospital as a place of torture or concentration camp experimentation: 'the doctors used to experiment with various drugs and treatments, and this would result in marked emotional and personality changes. Bill had shock treatment quite a lot and all sorts of other things done to him, but nothing helped' (300).

Gladys has several unpleasant hospital experiences. At Parkerville she avoids the clinic because it seems 'like a morgue' (294). The gynaecological interference she experiences at Jill's birth in hospital seems almost sadistic. The doctor fails to induce the delivery with hot baths, doses of castor oil and cascara, pills and injections, so they rupture the membranes. Weakened by the 'treatment', Gladys almost dies after the delivery (291). Again, when she attends a local maternity hospital for David's birth she is lucky to survive the difficult breech delivery in the hands of an uncaring and incompetent doctor. The matron who assists her through this ordeal almost kills her with a bungled blood transfusion (296-7).

For Nan hospital and doctors represent all that she has come to fear from white society. Her memory of the time she was forced to give blood for a relative, Helen Bunda, highlights the vulnerability of medical patients generally and of Aboriginal people within the racist society of the day (341). When she is eventually hospitalised for the tests which diagnose her lung cancer Nan suffers further distress, both physical and mental. The bronchoscopy causes infection while an unnecessary medical examination for the convenience of the hospital registrar humiliates and torments her. Vividly recalling the earlier experience she interprets the doctor's behaviour as motivated by racism and refuses to return for the radiotherapy they have prescribed:

'They only doin' that because I'm black ... I'm not goin' back there, Sal. I'm not havin' that treatment. You don't know what they might do to me' (314–15).

Contrasting with the hospital's unmagical and unhealthy atmosphere is the warmth of Sally's close-knit family and the healing quality of the natural environment, especially the family's tribal country near Corunna Downs (233). Other natural settings also possess healing qualities: the swamp where Sally loses 'all track of time' (59) and the garden, which provides the 'magical moment' when the bird call is heard beneath the sky, 'a cool hazy blue with the promise of coming warmth' (14). These are places where the whole person can find peace, where body and spirit are at one.

For *My Place* is overwhelmingly concerned with psychic wholeness, a condition which transcends the fragmentation of modern Western social experience signified by the hospital. In the pattern of contrast between health on the one side and disease on the other, the natural world untainted by industry as against the hospital, Aboriginal/Christian spirituality as against Western rationalism, half lives as opposed to whole lives, and speech rather than silence, one side of the opposition is shown to be intrinsically superior. Sally's attitude to doctors and institutionalised medicine—which finds expression in her rhetorical question to Nan, 'Doctors give you the shits, don't they?'—prevails despite there now being a Western-educated doctor in the family in the person of Sally's youngest sister, Helen.

The book's moving finale which encompasses Nan's death makes this plain. Treating the body without thought for the person's spirit proves to be inadequate. Nan dies in defiance of the judgment of the Silver Chain nurse, 'They give up the will to live, but they don't die because their bodies just won't let them ... this could go on for quite a while' (356). She dies because the prayers of her loved ones, which articulate her wish to go speedily and with dignity, bring peace. Her final days are marked by a sudden resurgence of health: 'she didn't look sick any more. Her face was bright and she was propped up in bed, smiling' (356). The 'Aboriginal bird' has called her spirit home 'to my own land and my own people. I got a good spot up there, they all waitin' for me' (357). At the very end of her life she at last accepts herself as an Aboriginal person and finds the spiritual wholeness reflected in her apparent renewal of health and in her aura of holiness: 'an overwhelming sense of calm' (357).

In the discussion of healing conducted in *My Place* the rational, materialistic, Western approach to life's problems is repeatedly shown to fail because it can't account for life in all its fullness. To repeat Nan's words, it demonstrates that 'the white man's stupid. He only believes in what he can see. He needs to get educated. He's only livin' half a life'. By subverting the usual meaning of the hospital (a site where healing occurs) so that it becomes instead a place of disease, mutilation and death, *My Place* provides a critique of the wider society the hospital represents. Nowhere are we given any evidence of Western medicine's healing propensities. Helen, who is in her final year of medical school and who represents this Western tradition within Sally's immediate family, is peripheral to the narrative, only mentioned briefly at her birth and in the chapter which deals with Nan's final illness.

In the chapter 'Something Serious' the contrast between the Western, scientific attitude to health and the spiritual approach to the complex totality of human experience crystallises in the argument between Helen and Gladys on the one hand, who insist that Nan should undergo hospital treatment, and Sally on the other, who opposes Nan's hospitalisation on the grounds that 'it's Nan's business what happens to her body and no-one else's. Let her do what she wants not what we think is right' (313). The outcome of Nan's brief hospital visit justifies Sally's view that Nan has more to fear from the medical profession than from dying.

This 'debate' between what Sally's view represents and what Helen's does has been developing from early in the narrative. Gladys, who has imbibed the Western view of success based on competition and the work ethic, has always wanted a doctor in the family, an understandable ambition for someone wishing to gain acceptance within white middle-class culture, given the high status of the medical profession in Australia. But Sally resists Gladys's pressure to pursue a medical career, preferring to dream about becoming an artist (96). Sally's recovery of her health and wholeness through affirming her Aboriginal heritage also involves the discovery of herself as an artist and writer. Her creative work in eliciting and communicating the life stories of her Aboriginal relatives is seen as redemptive: 'I don't like secrets. Not when they're the sort of secrets you could use to help your own people ... someone's got to tell. Otherwise things will stay the same,

they won't get any better' (319). As an artist and writer she becomes a different kind of healer, not a medical doctor but one who uses words and images to heal the ills of the spirit.

The vision of artistic purpose and function which informs the structure and thesis of *My Place* is essentially religious, a blend of Christian belief and a form of animism associated with Aboriginal totemic religion: 'a philosophy which regards man and nature as one corporate whole'.⁸ Such a vision challenges the materialist complacency of contemporary Australian secular culture while at the same time contributing to an Aboriginal 'renaissance' by fostering pride in an Aboriginal identity.

NOTES

1. N. Gare and P. Crawford, 'Sally Morgan's *My Place*—Two Views', *Westerly*, no. 3, Sept. (1987), 79–84.
2. Joy Hooton, 'Black Narratives', in *Stories of Herself When Young: Autobiographies of Childhood by Australian Women*. Melbourne: Oxford, 1990, 313.
3. J. Brett, 'Breaking the Silence: A gift to the reader', *Australian Book Review*, August (1987), 9–11.
4. D. Strauss, *Facing Writers: Australia's Leading Writers Talk With Dagnear Strauss*, transcripts from the ABC Television series, ABC 1990, 52.
5. Strauss, 52.
6. John Colmer, *Australian Autobiography: The Personal Quest*, Melbourne: Oxford, 1989, 109.
7. Mudrooroo Narogin, *Writing From the Fringe: A Study of Modern Aboriginal Literature*, 5th Melbourne: Hyland House, 1990, 149.
8. R. M. and C. H. Berndt, *The World of the First Australians, Aboriginal Traditional Life: Past and Present*, 4th edition, revised, 1985, reprinted with additions, Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1988, 293.

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