

# Robert Antoni's "Divina Trace" and the Womb of Place

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"Any and everything goes into a good callaloo. Serve with endless foofoo."

ROBERT ANTONI, *Divina Trace* (318)

IN ADVANCE PUBLICITY for Robert Antoni's monumental novel *Divina Trace* (1992), George Plimpton proclaims that "Trinidad, indeed the whole of the Caribbean, has its James Joyce." The comparison is in many ways apt, but finally more misleading than helpful. Like Joyce, Antoni seems endlessly experimental in the manipulation of voice and point of view; his language is syncretic and neologistic, calling to mind *Finnegans Wake* as readily as *Ulysses*. If the stylistic turns frequently pay homage to the modernist master (and sometimes explicitly), the overall impact and apparent import of the new novel is quite at odds with the European model. On the one hand, Joyce wanted *Ulysses* to provide such a realistic picture of his native land that, if Dublin were ever to be blown off the map, it could be reconstructed from his novel. Yet his disdain for the land he memorializes bubbles up endlessly. "I intend to lift [Ireland] into the international sphere and get away from the parish pump, and from 'my dearly beloved brethren,'" he told his friends (Ryan 181). Antoni, on the other hand, sets his novel in "Corpus Christi," a version of Trinidad, perhaps, but even the theological implications of his choice suggest that he is recreating a Trinidad not explicitly and photographically identical to that of V. S. Naipaul, Earl Lovelace, Merle Hodge, and others. If Joyce sought desperately to write the quintessential European novel by denouncing all parochialism,

Antoni has succeeded in writing the exultant Caribbean novel. He has done so, not by embracing parochialism, but by celebrating those very elements of the Caribbean experience that have scorched its collective history. He has done so in a work that holds together the many disparate elements that today uniquely embody the history and future of North and South America, of Africa and Europe, and even of India.

*Divina Tracce* offers a mythology for Caribbean self-actualization. Like many contemporary Latin American writers, Antoni and his principal narrator are on a "philological quest for a mythology of origins" (González-Echevarría, *Voice* 100) that employs whatever comes to hand: legends, religious cults, heroic stories. Such writing has moved from the anthropological to the archival (González-Echevarría, *Myth* 144), and shapes the narrative structure. As one of Antoni's characters recognizes near the end of the story, "each of us had our own individual chapter: the historical chapter, the myth, the medical report, the family saga" (383). Even that is too simple a description, however, since various elements gradually seep across the nice borders of careful chapter delineation. Something is going on here that suggests these "islands" speak to each other, through each other, presenting *together* the "true" story.

Antonio Benítez-Rojo would describe it as chaos. The Caribbean, he writes, is "a cultural meta-archipelago without center and without limits, a chaos within which there is an island that proliferates endlessly, each copy a different one, founding and refounding ethnological materials like a cloud will do with its vapor" (9). And this is precisely what happens in Antoni's novel: narrative segments are recycled through various characters, reshaped, lies are laid bare (or are they?), and one half of the book responds to the other. This is almost literally the case, since the book is divided into thirteen chapters that mirror each other. The first five, given over to central players in the story (Granny Myna, Papee Vince, Evalina, Dr. Domingo, and Mother Superior Maurina), are offered the stage in reverse order in the last five chapters (Mother Superior Maurina, Dr. Domingo, Evalina, Papee Vince, and Granny Myna). The central three chapters, in a linguistic tour de force, dance around the mystery at the heart of

the novel, the family, and the island. Referring, no doubt, as much to the author himself as to God, one character notes, "maybe . . . that oldman sitting up there with his perverse sense of humour . . . has something of a propensity for symmetry and balance" (238). In this regard there is an almost classical dramatic structure employed, an introduction of characters, a complication, a climax and resolution, and a falling off. But, as we shall see, this classicism is somewhat deceptive, since the stage upon which it is presented is Caribbean, subject to and celebrating variety and free play of indeterminables.

Dramatic it undeniably is. As Benítez-Rojo puts it, "[i]f I were to have to put [Caribbean culture] in one word I would say: performance. But performance not only in terms of scenic interpretation but also in terms of the execution of a ritual" (11). And the ritual here is on several levels. On the authorial level Antoni must lead the reader through the layers of the onion he holds before us, deep into the centre, and then out again through the onion's layers. All this ritual, as becomes clear about midway into it, represents the central narrator's ritualistic entry into the layers of his own consciousness, his own identity and personal mystery, and his re-emergence not only as an individual but as a Caribbean. On the level of the other characters the ritual involves the playing out of family rivalries, incest, murder, virgin birth, suicide, and rape.

As with any ritual, language here plays a prominent role. Antoni manages to juggle snatches from medical textbooks, coroner's reports, recipes, narrative poems, a mock table of contents, a variety of dialects, song lyrics, prayers, and so on. One hundred pages into the narrative, he introduces a startling picture of a deformed fetus, and exactly one hundred pages from the end of the story he includes the negative of that photo. And, mocking the sense of significance that this fearful symmetry might suggest, exactly in the middle of the book he includes an aluminum page in which the reader's face reflects. Thus, the reader is forced to recognize her or his role in the ritual, the "reading" of oneself that characterizes, from a postmodern point of view, one's engagement with language. Adding insult to insight, the central chapter of the novel, the heart of this apparent

order, is the voice of Hanuman, the monkey god, who directly addresses the reader: "Seeing in de page you own moonkeyface ee-eeing, quick out you dreamsleep walcott! *You*: Tara potto? *She*: you monkeymummy? Macaca sinica dis literary cacashit!" (205). In language that is at once opaque and glistening with puns and allusions, all language as an adequate mimesis for experience is called into question. The reader is worn down by such language, and that ritualistic engagement with inadequacy embodies the Caribbean identity Antoni stages.

As Papee Vince explains to Johnny Domingo, the central narrating consciousness, "I can only give this story back to you the way life give it to me—the way the story asks itself to be told—with all its many deceptions, and cumbructions, and confufflations. Because all that is as essential to the telling of this story—as essential to the understanding of it—as any amount of poetry pile up in the po beneath you bed" (342). Mother Maurina elsewhere explains that the story is told in the way it is told "until you have give up longlast in exhaustion" (240) and have seen that the real truth must be intuited. Like Jacques Stephen Alexis, Antoni demonstrates that something like "marvellous realism" is far superior to European realism as a reflection of the Caribbean world. At the same time, as many have noted, those who have an alien language forced upon them frequently become masters of the *double entendre*, setting the language against itself and, implicitly, against the imposed world structure that it represents.<sup>1</sup> Thus, in Papee Vince's view, there is not a very long history of Caribbean writing, for two reasons: in the first place, "why the ass would anybody in they right mind want to read out a story dead, that they could hear in a hundred different *living* versions—each one better than the one before—on any streetcorner or porchstop they happen to stumble"; and, second, "you never truly grow up until the death of you second parent. . . . Only *then* can you come to know youself. And in fact, we only just finish matriciding we mummy-England the other day" (368).

So clear and straightforward, in fact, is Papee Vince's voice that Antoni might here fall victim to Kenneth Ramchand's prescient observation: "In an area of deprivation, longing, and rootlessness," he writes, "where so many people are inarticulate, the

novelist may find himself tempted into passionate documentary" (6), and yet, of course, Papee Vince, in his rather extensive documentation of Caribbean history (political and religious), *is*, in fact, one voice among many—clear, but in some ways less emotionally compelling than the disturbing and sometimes unbalanced speakers who surround him. This is *his* performance, one whose political fervour is almost comforting as an explicit suggestion that anger may lead to logical redress. But very little of the anger expressed by the characters in this novel seems salvific, even that expressed by the victims. There is, it seems, an angry murder of Barto, the manipulative colonizer, by his descendant (340), and there is Granny Myna's refusal to forgive her unfaithful husband, the same Barto (422); but the book's final gesture, the one that fills the novel with hope, is the same woman's peaceful transcendence of the hatred that has afflicted her life and that of the Caribbean (425-26).

At the same time, there is very little genuine love in the story. Instead, there is great sexual passion and coercion, violence that is sometimes so extreme that the reader never allows its dream-like expression to coalesce as actual reality. The rapes serve as obvious metaphors for what has happened to the Caribbean, but seem, as well, to embody a Shiva-like expression of life and death forces, a coming to birth, willy-nilly, of some new reality.

If the state's role is portrayed as a rape, the Church's role comes to be identified with sterility and homoeroticism. Thus, the bishop involved in important canonization proceedings kisses Dr. Domingo full on the mouth, without any apparent rationale (284), and, in the next generation, the Monsignor does the same to Domingo's son, Johnny. Gomez, Chief of Police, rapist, and son of Mother Maurina and Barto, is a figure of ridicule throughout the island for his well-known sterility (278, 281).

The inbreeding already apparent is echoed in the incest that haunts the novel. Barto again figures centrally. Father of Magdalena, he fathers with her the frog-child, and then marries Magdalena off to his own son, Gomez, Magdalena's rapist (281). The sequence of relationships is dizzying and generally horrifying, but at its heart lies mystery rather than repulsion. It is as

though Antoni is forcing the reader into a realm beyond empiricism and ethics. "The events of my life," Johnny Domingo decides, "always seem[ed] more implausible than all the impossible stories I had never thought to question. Never felt the need to understand" (227). What they all come to represent for Johnny, all these unfathomable relationships, is the collective memory of the Caribbean, focussing now in himself:

Now all that remained of the real world was to tell me that I was alive within the confines of this dream of my life, breathing. An empty cold glassbottle and the fingerprint of wet mud already drying on my forehead. . . . Another event seen or heard or touched sometime somewhere in my childhood, or my father's childhood, or my father's father's childhood which I could know, believe, but no longer remember. Not until now, seventy-seven years later. (227)

The mystery that lies at the centre of *Divina Trace* is the identity of Magdalena. Since in the course of the novel, her story is told by seven different narrators who do not agree, or do not know the whole story, and since the unifying consciousness of Johnny Domingo is now ninety and trying to recall events that happened when he was thirteen, fifteen, and eighteen, she remains, at the end of the story, a mystery. What gains significance, and this becomes the ultimate focus for Antoni, is the identity she acquires for Johnny Domingo. In piecing that together, he pieces together the Caribbean consciousness.

Papee Vince asks: "Is this Magdalena an ordained nun, a married woman, or a consecrated whore? And the answer, it seems to me, is obvious enough: she is all three" (49). We come to know her mother was Mother Maurina and her father, Barto (142). But it is in the birth of her child (possibly by Barto), in her death (possibly by suicide) while giving birth to that child, and in her subsequent apotheosis as having remained a virgin throughout that she focusses the Caribbean's attention. In some sense, her story is already well-known, and simply one more ingredient Antoni throws into his tasty *callaloo*: she is "La Divina Pastora," written about by fellow Trinidadian, C. L. R. James, in 1928, in a story remarkably free from European influences. But in the course of *Divina Trace*, Antoni demonstrates how universal a

symbol she has become, a palimpsest for all the stories inscribed by "her" people, as Papee Vince records:

it was precisely at this historical moment, the moment we needed her most—the moment of we greatest confusion and desperation—that the black madonna came to all of we together and collected in she fifth and final reincarnation. Because she had already come to each of we individually in we time of need: to the Pañyols as Divina Pastora, to the Amerindians as Akambo-Mah, to the Africans as Mamma Latay, to the East Indians as Kali Mai. Now she came to all of we collected and together as *Magdalena Divina*. Of course, before she could come to we as Magdalena, she had to resurrect and reunite she previous four incarnations: she had to flock we up. (377)

The way she "flocked" everyone up was by becoming a symbol of their own identity; specifically, in the refusal of the Vatican to declare her a saint and, thereby, apparently prolonging and maintaining a European condescension towards the peoples of the Caribbean ("all else you have come to know and believe and dutifully to pass from generation to generation since your first beginnings, is but a fiction of your collective imagination" [312]), those who believed in her sanctity as a demonstrated fact and therefore independent of Vatican validation could now embrace her as their own. In doing so, they recognized what her symbology implied about themselves: "that the whole of Corpus Christi was nothing but one big callaloo with all of we boiling up swimming together inside, and nobody could know any longer who was who and what was what, much less care to make a difference" (365). Once again, it is Papee Vince, the nationalist, who offers the clearest interpretation: "She accomplished something no storyteller had ever done before or since: she brought she story to life in the black madonna. It was a story to top all others. Even the Biblical one. . . . It was a first self-sustaining breath, and it became we very respiration: *St. Maggy!*" (384). Mary Magdalen, the fallen prostitute, now raised up *by her own hand* to sainthood—this is possibly not too far from Benítez-Rojo's characterization of the difference between the European and North American sense of "all or nothing, for or against, honor or blood" and the Caribbean sense for life: "In Chicago," he writes, "a beaten soul says: 'I can't take it any more,' and gives himself up to drugs or the most desperate violence. In Havana,

he would say: 'The thing to do is not die,' or perhaps: 'Here I am, fucked but happy'" (10).

Since the entire story is filtered through the consciousness of this ninety-year-old man, Johnny Domingo, a physician from a family of physicians, a Trinidadian whose children now live in the United States, the confusion in the telling of this story logically reflects his own struggle to accept the full implications of his identity as a Caribbean. How *else* could such a narrative proceed except through doubling-back, cross-checking, refusals to face the truth, refusals to admit different *kinds* of truth, different kinds of "evidence"?

This is why *Divina Trace* is so fascinated with language. At the heart of the story is the blood feud between Mother Maurina and Granny Myna. They are sisters who have not spoken a word to each other in over fifty years—and all for jealousy over Barto. Their split-consciousness heals only in the sublimation offered by Magdalena Divina. They do, however, speak to Johnny, and to the reader, and, along with the other characters, represent different languages.

The servant girl Evalina speaks the language of religion, though it is obeah. Ironically, she describes her work as "science" (80). She enters deeply into the mysteries of nature and a kind of animism, and passes on to Johnny the blood curse Barto has brought down upon his descendants. In Johnny's mind "her voice became even the voice of Monsignor O'Connor" (82). As she increasingly embodies the ineffable, Roman Catholicism solidifies into a secular institution. Dr. Domingo reminds his son, in discussing the reasons that Magdalena was rejected from canonization: "Boy, you know as well as anybody else, when it comes to matters of faith, the Church don't believe nothing without hard scientific proof" (25).

But this is what little Johnny had sought, anyway: hard scientific proof on which he could build a firm foundation of truth: "You believe [Daddy]," he tells himself, "because daddy's language of medical science understands everything clean clean. So the best way to forget that frogchild and this Magdalena and the whole confusion fagood faever, is to become a doctor like daddy and learn to speak that language" (109). It is the language of



Uncle Olly, as well, someone only interested in endlessly dissecting and storing away in jars. Johnny's decision to embrace the world of science is made as a consequence of the Monsignor's kiss: "That night I made up my mind to become a physician. It was as if the world were suddenly divided, as if I could choose between science and religion and disregard the other" (96). Though Dr. Domingo, Johnny's father, does not explicitly believe in God, he does recognize that the dichotomy within which his son wishes to choose is unhealthy: "Boy, there are some things in this story which speak louder than the hardest facts, and unfortunately these are the things I can never give you" (111-12). But the other voices in the story *can* give Johnny these things, as he learns over the remainder of his life. Papee Vince, for example, tells him that "the truth remains that there are certain things in this world which defy explanation. Explanation, that is, in the terms which we recognize: the explicit terms of science and logic. What's more—more unsettling fa you son, but all the more encouraging fa dead up oldman like me—what's more is that such things are encountered every day" (42).

Papee Vince's language, however, is not as necessary to Johnny as the emotive language of Mother Maurina. She is obsessed with words and patterns of words. She ridicules English as "a funny language sounding like the songs children compose to run skipping down the road" (137), a language "without any verbs about it a-tall that it is always impossible to know who is saying what and when and where" (153); Hindi and Creole and Warragoon are "three funny languages sounding the first like an oldman blowing struggling to make a caca, and the second groaning stretching he toetee shaking to squeeze out a weewee, and the third is holding he breath fighting to force a fart *pfffft*" (142). She listens, obviously, to the world around her, takes it all in, relates to it all in a physical and creative way. She is, in fact, the Molly Bloom of this novel, soliloquizing in much the same life-affirming way (155). But she seems also to be the voice most indelibly printed in Johnny's memory:

I know now, many years later, that even though I was not listening, I was hearing what Mother Maurina was saying. It was as though through the sensory overload she had managed to tap some source

deeper than my conscious mind, deeper than reasoning and touching and actually tasting, because I now know that although I was not listening, I was hearing every word. I was taking it all in, together with every comma and period and grammatical marker, scribbling it all down verbatim on a piece of paper already crowded with words: every inflection and tonal variation recorded indelibly on the black surface of my collective unconscious. (157)

She is also a voice of apocalypse (160) and, as the ninety-year-old Johnny comes to realize, here “ranting and raving and exantaying,” because they tapped into the world of imagination, “belonged legitimately to the real world . . . in a way in which I did not” (164). In all her stream-of-consciousness and free-form babbling, she perfectly embodies Wilson Harris’s choice of language as a vehicle for the imagining of new associations across cultures. She speaks, in Papee Vince’s words, in ways that “seemed connected by that strange sense of reality which connects nonsensical events in dreams” (53). Or, in Evalina’s view, she speaks the way she does because “just like Papa God and Satan both, de saints could speak *all de language*” (82).

One of the rumours regarding the frog-child was that he had learned three or four languages within three days of his birth—so it is time we turned our attention to him (120). From the medical point of view, this child of the incestuous relationship between Magdalena and her father, Bartolomeo Amadad Domingo, is an anencephalic male born prematurely. Strangely, “Manuelito,” as his father named him, was apparently not born dead, but lived for three days. As is already apparent, he was given different names by various individuals, and served, in fact, as something of an icon, demanding a response from the viewer. Papee Vince wonders:

What sort of child he was, I would not venture to guess. Some called him the jabjab heself, son of Manfrog, the folktale devil-sprite who waits in a tree to rape young virgins at dusk. Others saw nothing peculiar in the child a-tall. Some even said that the child was beautiful, perfect: that the child was the reflection of the viewer. Some argued the hex of an obeah spell. Others, the curse of Magdalena’s obsession with Swamp Maraval, with frogs fucking; that he was, as Salizar suggested, a crapochild. Still others, prompted by the young physician who’d just come to St. Maggy Hospital then, that he was the result of a congenital abnormality. . . . Son, we can resign

weselves to only this: there is no logical explanation. We will never know. (58-59)

He was delivered by Dr. Domingo, who, admittedly, had been drinking a good bit during the operation, but who, nonetheless, described the birth as breech and, something he found surprising, live (106). He had, in the view of many, the head and torso of a frog, and the fully-developed genitals of an adult male. Some say he did not live three days, but only a few hours. In any event, many claimed to have tried to kill him. Granny Myna calls it "the living sin of all the earth" (8). Barto claims to have shot it dead; Uncle Olly claims to have dissected it; Granny Myna claims to have boiled it. The official gravestone lists his birth and death as 19 April, 1899.

Since this is Johnny's story, his relationship with Manuelito is the most significant. Upon the urging of Evalina, he remembers going to the graveyard after Granny Myna dies, digging up the jar in which the frog-child is apparently still living, and releasing him into the water, "thinking, not understanding, believing: *He is alive*" (25). The act is a primal memory that haunts his subsequent years, an act he struggles to understand and affirm, even though it is illogical and, probably, something that never really happened. Yet his various voices in *Divina Trace* seem to have conflicting views of what the real world is. The result, he notes, is that it is "as though *my* imagination had conceived him, and carried him, and borne him into the world and given him life" (99).

With this insight, Johnny comes face-to-face with the post-modern consciousness that structures *Divina Trace* and, in the view of writers like Benítez-Rojo and Edouard Glissant, seems especially suited to the Caribbean psyche. In remembering the collective unconscious that speaks through Mother Maurina, Johnny "did something never done before in the annals of literature and all the chronicles of man's childish endeavours":

Slowly, very carefully, I reached and touched my index finger to the pointed tip of my own imagination. I felt it. . . . The farthest extremity of my deepest, most sacred self, and I sat back calmly . . . telling myself once more: *It is only a dream. A dream.* And like the sleeper who is conscious of his dream, I felt some vague control over it, though I

knew I possessed none whatsoever. I knew well enough that any idea of authority or even subtle influence was mere illusion. (156-57)

But Mother Maurina serves only as a guru, leading Johnny to the doorway to a new consciousness but unable to walk across the lintel for him. The courage to do so is gradually, after many years, provided by this strange fetal memory. He must finally accept all that he has imagined to be hideous and claim it as his own:

as I stood watching the frogchild swim away [it was] as though in that frogchild I had seen for the first time that the world was not an extension of me, but that I was an extension of the world. My aloneness had been suddenly violated, split in two by that swimming frogchild, as though in that frogchild I had suddenly seen myself, my other self, the constant companion of my on-going silent conversation, my twin brother. I had seen the other I. Not the imagined I but the I of my imagination: the imagining I. . . . Now I realised that anything could happen in this dream of my life, in this dream of my dream. Anything, and I would have no choice but to believe. To surrender myself to this primal power. (170)

I would suggest that this falls in line with the thinking of Edouard Glissant. As Michael Dash has noted, however,

the point of departure of Caribbean literature has been the effort to write the subject into existence. Its master theme has been the quest for individual identity. The heroic prodigal, the solemn demiurge, the vengeful enfant terrible, outspoken Caliban—these are some of the pervasive images of the transcendental subject in Caribbean literature. (Glissant xiii)

But this “typical” Caribbean thrust is not what is happening to Johnny Domingo in *Divina Trace*. Instead, he is surrendering himself to a communal identity, less ego-driven, less Cartesian. What thirteen-year-old Johnny Domingo experiences, is haunted by, and finally, at the age of ninety, accepts, is a decentred self. In Glissant’s view, “the world can no longer be shaped into a system. Too many Others and Elsewheres disturb the placid surface” (229). And Johnny Domingo recognizes that this other self, powerful and alien, is not a threat but a source of energy and strength:

I know the only way to find that frogchild still hiding somewhere alive in the labyrinth of those innumerable mangrove banyans, is to turn around and surrender myself unconditionally to this primal power—

to surrender myself up to this monkey of my imagination and let him speak, even in his own impenetrable monkey-language—to turn around and go back to the beginning once more. . . . Failure is the point of all this . . . failure is the meaning of all this confusion. (172)

Failure of the totalizing worldview that depends upon empiricism and individual agency and, in their place, "*une poétique de la Relation*" (Glissant xii).

In her own way, this is the worldview embraced by Granny Myna, the one given the first and last chapter in *Divina Trace*. She recognized that her life, her series of relationships, her Caribbean, in fact, had been "a construction of careful but vicariously placed cards—piled up enthusiastically and naively too high, too long ago—but it stood" (408). And Papee Vince thought Granny Myna should be given the last word because "you see, son, it is not so much the telling of this story. It is the *believing* in it. . . . But son, it would take many more years fa me to accept it. To embrace it not only fa myself, but fa all of we together" (396, 398).

Granny Myna does it instinctively. Whereas Barto, near the end of his life, offers the narrator a desiccated communion of cassava bread, and is soundly rejected (339), Granny Myna quietly serves the only meaningful communion in this wild *callaloo* of a novel:

Sweet heart of Jesus! Soon as those dasheen leaves begin to boil I take off running. Evalina scream but I can't feel nothing in my hands a-tall, because before I can pull them from out the pot he is already cooking! It is the *biggest* callaloo anybody ever see, and anybody who taste it say it is the *best* they ever eat. We are all gather round the table for this big Christmas dinner, you daddy and Jose and Barnabas, Simon and Pablo and Tomas with he cokeeyes, and Reggie and Paco and little Amadao, and when these boys start to eat they can never stop, that soon I begin to think this story will no finish a-tall before they burst. All you can hear in the house is *shup shup shup* with the spoons scraping the bowls, and pass some more of that callaloo please! (418)

She has boiled up the frogchild and served him up as a communion of familial encounter with what she had earlier called "the living sin of all the earth." She exemplifies one of Wilson Harris's principal tenets: "By the transforming powers of imag-

ination, what appears to have been irretrievably lost may be recuperated—indeed in the very energy involved in violent and destructive acts reside the seeds of creativity” (Ashcroft et al. 150).

Thus if *Divina Trace* frequently pays an often ironic homage to modernists like Joyce and Faulkner, it also recognizes that the Caribbean is a more explicitly cross-cultural world, one that is an archipelago still in the making. Its literature, therefore, while incorporating, along with everything else, structures that suggest a unity, and characters that seem to struggle toward a totalizing view of reality, does more. In novels like *Divina Trace* the newer writers explicitly recognize, as Johnny Domingo finally does, that “there is no end to any of this. There is only beginning, and between, and beginning again” (62).

## NOTE

- 1 See, for example, Ashcroft et al. 38-77.

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