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The Accidental Social Movement: An Examination of Hybrid Social Movements Through the "It Gets Better" Campaign

SYNOPSIS

As new communication technologies that access the virtual realm become more dynamic, their role in and use during social movements is becoming more prevalent. It is the purpose of this project to examine the role of social networking sites (SNS) and online user generated content (UGC) in creating and maintaining what I am calling accidental social movements. Using the It Gets Better campaign as a case study, I hope to shed light on not only these accidental social movements, but also how online social movements are troubling and changing how we perceive the notions of mobilization within movements. In addition to understanding the role of the virtual realm in the creation and maintenance of accidental social movements, my aim for project is to better understand how accidental social movements both compliment and complicate the global flow of information via the Internet. By drawing upon Appadurai's concepts of the techno- and mediascapes of globalization, this project uses the It Gets Better campaign to look at how social campaigns in the virtual realm spread to a global audience; how the very Western ideal of "it" getting better is accepted by different cultures and countries and what the potential is for an accidental social movement like this to both simultaneously essentialize and de-essentialize the concept of a sexual or gender identity for those whom the message is intended. It is the overall intention of this research project to better understand the accidental social movement through the lens of the It Gets Better campaign.

FRAMING RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In *Networks of Outrage and Hope,* Manuel Castells (2012) examines the role of new communication technologies, like social networking, and their impact on social movements around the world. Outlining several different social and political movements from around the world, Castells (2012) explores what he calls "the new public space"— that "…networked space between the digital space and the urban space…" (p. 11) which he sees as a space of autonomous communication. This new public space is ground for the coalition of what Castells (2012) sees as networks of outrage and hope. As he conceptualized it, social movements are often born out of outrage: outrage at oppression and hegemony, personal rights violations and abuses. These movements are sustained through hope: hope that these movements can and will illicit social and political change. His research demonstrates how these new social movements fluidly move back and forth between the virtual and physical realms and that while much of the social and political change happens in the physical realm, movements are sustained, organized and given a global audience in the virtual realm.

One kind of movement that Castells (2012) does not focus is on is what I am calling "the accidental social movement." This phenomenon occurs when an individual or group posts content online that goes viral and thus becomes a movement. There has been little research done on not only movements that stay primarily in the virtual realm but also those movements that did not start out with the initial intention of being political or

activist in nature. In essence, these accidental social movements are a kind of social movement unlike any we have seen before. It is because of this that I am interested in seeing how these movements problematize how we think about mobilization in movements; how these virtual movements are informed and influenced by their global and viral nature, and; how a movement with such global impact can relate to different types of varied minority communities around the world. This study does so by examining accidental social movements through the lens of the It Gets Better campaign. Specifically, this research will engage with the following research questions:

RQ1: What does a campaign like It Gets Better tell us about the virtual public sphere and the movements that are mobilized in it?

RQ2: How do accidental social movements like the It Gets Better campaign problematize traditionally held notions of how social movements should mobilized?

RQ3: How does the It Gets Better campaign essentialize and/or de-essentialize the experiences of gender and/or sexual minorities?

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

In this research, I propose to look at a particular sort of movement that has been occurring mostly in the virtual realm, with moments of uprising within the physical: the anti-bullying movement within the queer community as started by the It Gets Better campaign. It Gets Better was started by Dan Savage and his husband, Terry Miller. In September 2010, Savage, a journalist, and Miller, posted a video on YouTube in response to the recent spate of suicides among young people who had been bullied because of their presumed sexual and/or gender identity expression. Originally, the video was meant to be a "one-off," a one-time posting that gave hope to young queer individuals who were facing harassment in their lives. The message was simple: please don't kill yourself because it gets better. Within a week, the video went viral and soon more people were uploading videos to the official YouTube site with the same message: "It Gets Better." To date, there are over 50,000 It Gets Better videos uploaded to the Internet. Additionally, there have been MTV specials recorded, a book published, and grassroots campaigns across the globe that are trying to change policy within communities and societies to legislate against homophobic bullying ("It Gets Better," 2013). The It Gets Better campaign continues to increase in salience, specifically in the United States, because even as gender and sexual minorities are given rights in some states, they are being taken away in others. For example, in 2011, Michigan passed an anti-bullying law that had a clause that allowed for bullying based on strongly held "religious beliefs or moral convictions" (Hirschfeld, 2011). This loophole in the law was widely considered to be permissive to anti-gay bullying, as individuals who are arrested for hate crimes and/or bullying against queer individuals can quote specific "anti-homosexuality" verses from religious texts and provide evidence of their faith or their moral conviction (Hirschfeld, 2011). In addition, the media's recent overall attention on bullying and harassment predicated on homophobia has led to some individuals to fear for their

safety—especially during the tumultuous period of the coming out process (Peterson, 2010).

The It Gets Better movement, like the others that Castells (2012) examines, was born out of outrage: specifically Savage's outrage at the seeming social apathy at homophobic bullying and suicides. Also, like the other movements examined by Castells (2012), this movement is sustained by hope: in this case, literal hope that if queer youth can just stay strong, it will eventually get better. However, unlike the movements outlined by Castells (2012), the It Gets Better campaign was not originally intended to become a movement; it was merely two people with power and cultural capital using the Internet as an outlet for their outrage. In essence, the It Gets Better campaign is an accidental social movement trying to spread a message of hope. While there has been vocal criticism of this approach (Eichler, 2010), mostly that we as a society cannot guarantee that it is going to get better for all queer youth, there is no denying that the movement have been a cultural zeitgeist and that there has indeed been change in states like Hawaii and Michigan, which have added anti-bullying statutes and in states like Massachusetts which have broadened already existing anti-bullying laws to include bullying based on sexual and/or gender identity expression ("Bully Police," 2012). More importantly, however, is that the virtual network created by the It Gets Better campaign is giving life-sustaining hope to queer youth who are living in states where there is no legal protection against anti-gay bullying. This campaign, however, has not been a queer utopia of hope, and while it has been the subject of praise from the highest critics, it has also been subjected to some of the harshest critiques, especially within the queer community. Part of this critique could come from the fact that the It Gets Better campaign has created a social movement that is unique and unlike the many social movements that preceded it. It is specifically because of this that I am interested in looking at how the It Gets Better campaign has problematized the function and end-goal of social movements and how it is creating unconventional changes around the world, in both the virtual and physical realms.

IMPORTANCE AND TIMELINESS OF RESEARCH

a. New Communication Technologies and Intellectual Property

One interesting aspect of the It Gets Better movement is how it uses new communication technologies to not only demonstrate how media users can have as much impact on the system as the media system itself, but that it also demonstrates a reworking of what intellectual property is and how it should be regulated. Like hackers studied in Coleman's (2013) ethnography, *Coding Freedom*, individuals who post It Gets Better videos are using new communication technologies to challenge the notions of traditional intellectual property rights. While Savage and Miller created the first video, they do not purport to "own the idea" and encourage others to post videos and disseminate the information found in the videos. In this way, it echoes Coleman's (2013) examination of creative commons and "copyleft" laws. Rather than trying to control the information and ideas expressed in the original It Gets Better video, Savage and Miller have opened it to the global virtual community. In essence, the It Gets Better campaign has done away

with the idea of a romantic author (Boyle, 1996) within the project. According to Boyle (1996), as we enter into the information age, we as a society (and even as a global community) need to challenge the concept of the romantic author: we need to reject the often dogmatically driven notion that the specific expression of an idea comes from one person and one person only. Boyle (1996) voices his concern about this restriction of intellectual property being owned by a romantic author, stating: "…how can we give property rights in intellectual products and yet still have the inventiveness and free flow of information which liberal social theory demands" (p. 53). Indeed, Coleman (2013) echoes this when she points out that one criticism hackers have about intellectual property rights is the fact that the same idea can be expressed in a number of different ways. Using an example of Johansen, a sixteen-year-old hacker who had been arrested for criminally circumventing copyrighted software, Coleman (2013) points out that in protest, numerous hackers wrote codes in different "languages" that mimicked the properties of Johansen's code. Their protest helps to support the Boyle's (1996) criticism of intellectual property laws, specifically where he states that a foundational piece of the romantic author comes from inspiration: "'Inspiration' came to be explicated in terms of *original* genius with the consequence that the inspired work was made peculiarly and distinctively the product—and the property—of the writer" (emphasis added in the original; p. 54). However, the hackers in Coleman's (2013) ethnography challenges the notion that inspiration is the original genius by demonstrating how code as different speech acts can replicate the original *inspiration* and still maintain its own inherent beauty and value beyond the original.

In this same way, the It Gets Better campaign also challenges the notions of the romantic author and copyright. As was mentioned previously, while Miller and Savage had the original inspiration behind the concept of the message "it gets better," they both understood as it became viral and more people started using their own expressions of speech to deliver the message that it would have more impact as an "open-sourced idea" rather than one that they tightly controlled. What is ironic, however, is that while it seems that Miller and Savage are open to the idea of individuals posting their own version of their original idea, Savage still "owns" the It Gets Better project. According to the project's home page, "It Gets Better," and "It Gets Better Project" are trademarked to Savage Love, LLC., and while their Terms of Use explicitly state that all contributors own their own content, by submitting it to the It Gets Better website, you are granting the It Gets Better Project full permission to use your content in anyway they see fit ("Terms of Use," 2013). It would seem, then, that at a micro level, the It Gets Better campaign has fundamentally challenged the notions of the romantic author and copyright laws by opening their message to interpretation by anyone who has access to a computer and Internet, but at the macro level, it is still reifying copyright and intellectual property by maintaining control over how the message gets disseminated and used. The question is whether or not this seeming contradiction in message and idea ownership, control and dissemination has any effect on the It Gets Better campaign as a social movement. In addition to who actually owns the messages behind the It Gets Better campaign is the concern about equal access to the dissemination of the messages. In other words, who has access to this virtual public realm and are the people who need to hear the message the most the ones who are receiving it?

b. The Virtual Public Sphere

What makes the It Gets Better campaign unique against other social movements is the fact that it exists almost solely on the Internet. The virtual landscape of the Internet is something that has been of particular interest to scholars across disciplines for almost two decades now. Often, this virtual public sphere has been modeled as the utopian ideal of Habermas' (1962) concept of the public sphere. The public sphere, Habermas (1962) argues, is a place where private individuals (originally of the bourgeois class) come together in public to engage in rational/critical discourse. In order to engage in this rational/critical discourse, an individual must be seen and act as an equal to all others in the public sphere. In order to do this, an individual must "bracket," or set aside, that which is different. The problem with bracketing, however, was that anyone who had a trait that could not be "made invisible" was denied access to the public sphere. This then included women, people of color, people with disabilities, individuals of lower classes and those of minority sexualities (Fraser, 1992). In Habermas' (1964) vision of the public sphere, minorities who were unable to access the public sphere found that they had no voice within society. Not only are minorities silenced within this concept of the public sphere, but because they are not equal to those who are granted access to it and are seen as belonging to a counterpublic (Warner, 2002). Coombe (1998) continues to complicate Habermas' (1964) notion of the public sphere by pointing out that in the modern public sphere access is granted through authorship. However, the conceptualization of authorship that enters the public sphere is that of Boyle's (1996) romantic author—the individual whose inspiration is disseminated through the public sphere, granting them access and giving them political authority over those who are not given a voice within this idealized deliberative democracy. Coombe (1998) complicates the romantic authorship within the public sphere by stating that: "Authors and their publics are fashioned by collective practices that uphold the 'arena in which a public 'self' may reflect and address her reflections to other 'selves''" (p. 251-252). In other words, authorship and the meanings and intentions behind the inspiration of authorship are constantly contextually bound and unstable; meaning is both simultaneously reconstructed as it is reified. Even though those who had access to the public sphere, literary or physically, were continuously positioned against the other through constantly contested meanings, it was still their voice and meanings that were seen as the dominant discourses in society, nearly effective in their silencing of those who belonged to a counterpublic.

It would seem with the advent of the Internet, however, that individuals who were seen as unequal in society and/or of belonging to a counterpublic were able to effectively "bracket" all that made them unequal because of the relative anonymity that the virtual public realm could afford them. In effect, those in the virtual realm were using the Internet and their computer as a "prosthetic body." According to Warner (2002), artifacts like computers that access the virtual realm act as "public, prosthetic bodies that take abuse for the private person" (Warner, 2002, p. 164). For example, individuals who are struggling with their gender or sexual identity, SNS profiles have become virtual bodies with which they can negotiate their identity. In her 2007 research on gender bending,

Ross (2007) found that women were using the anonymity of the Internet to strip away the heuristic gender cues that usually accompany face-to-face interactions. By doing this, the women Ross (2007) interviewed described a more dynamic and unique communication experience. Ross' (2007) research supported research done by Turkle (1995) who found that in the realm of virtual role playing games that the player's assigned corporeal gender did not necessarily match the gender they assigned themselves in the virtual world of the game.

This ability to challenge the dominant discourse through alternative readings is one of the reasons why the It Gets Better campaign is a unique artifact of the virtual realm. Cyberspace has long been seen as a place that provides these alternative space that allow marginalized populations of counterpublics to express themselves or tell their own version of it getting better in a less threatening space than the physical world can often be. Del-Teso-Craviotto found that SNS and UGC help individuals to negotiate the articulation of language that will allow them to express their sexuality in their own terms (Del-Teso-Craviotto, 2008). What is of particular note in regards to the It Gets Better campaign, however, is that because it does exist almost solely in the virtual realm, there is the question about how this fluid flexibility of many voices speaking on behalf of the movement problematizes out currently held notions of what a social movement should look like and what its end product should be. Traditionally, social movements ended in a physical mobilization of some sort, whether it be a march on Wall Street like Castells (2012) outlines with the Occupy movement or the protests in Tahrir Square in Egypt, the result was *movement*. However, when a social movement occupies the virtual realm, what does mobilization even mean at that point. One point of this project would be to better understand what mobilization means in the virtual realm and to perhaps reconceptualize what the end results for modern social movements are and should be.

c. Social Movements

As I mentioned previously, Castells (2012) examined the role of new communication technologies, like social networking, and their impact on social movements around the world. The It Gets Better movement, like the others that Castells (2012) examined, was born out of outrage: specifically Savage's outrage at the seeming social apathy at homophobic bullying and suicides. What is of particular note in this project is the fact that the It Gets Better project did not start out as a social movement nor did it ever really move out of the virtual realm, but rather has moments of "rupture" in the physical realm. Moreover, the relative ease of both posting and viewing online UGC from the privacy of one's own home brings into question the efficacy of what is being called "slacktivism" or "armchair activism."

Generally thought of to have been coined by Dwight Clark, the term slacktivism is a portmanteau of the words slacker and activism (Christensen, 2011). Originally, Clark used the term positively as a way to "…refer to bottom up activities by young people to affect society on a small personal scale…" (Christensen, 2011, par. 17). Today, however, the term has a mostly negative connotation to describe individuals who are not willing or able to participate in a full-blown activist campaign. As Christensen (2011) pointed out,

however, the use of the Internet in so-called slacktivist campaigns can actually be a useful tool to reach a wide potential audience and to affect change in innovative ways. In this way, social movements that have moved to exist primarily in the virtual realm are not merely forms of activism for the uninspired or half-committed; they are movements of innovation and mass dissemination that often reach a global impact.

There has been pushback against the rise in slacktivism, however. Much of the criticism leveled at the Arab Spring uprisings was that that there was a lot of activity in the virtual realm but that it did not translate into mobilization (Christensen, 2012) within what Castells (2012) calls the "urban spaces." For example, Corvese (2013) criticizes slacktivism, stating that it "…involves supporting a cause on an individual level without doing much to support the big picture" (par. 2). Raymond (2012) also highlights this critique by pointing out that often slacktivism is just activism that takes place online and that because there is no physical mobilization like traditional movements, they are seen as less effective or ineffective. This critique of slacktivism brings us back to a central thesis of this research; specifically, whether or not we should be using "traditional social movements" as the benchmark for social movements that are born and inhabit the virtual realm. Accidental social movements like the It Gets Better campaign may give us insight into not only how virtual movements behave, but also what mobilization looks like from the perspective of the armchair activist. In addition to the fact that accidental social movements may call for the reconceptualization of movements within digital realms, there is also the fact that the It Gets Better campaign can shed light into how accidental social movements in the virtual realm behave on the global stage.

d. Appadurai's -scapes and Globalization

One aspect of the It Gets Better campaign that has set it apart from more traditional social movements is its global reach. Within a very short amount of time, the videos in the campaign went viral around the world, spreading a message of tolerance and acceptance for queer youth. The issue surrounding the quick dissemination of the It Gets Better message was that it is taking a very Western conceptualization of what equal rights for queer individuals looks like and spreading it to a global audience. In the following section, I will outline the implications for global flows of information and how that can both simultaneously essentialize and de-essentialize the experience of identity for queer individuals around the world. In "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," Appadurai (1996) conceptualized the junctures and disjunctures created within the simultaneous heterogenization and homogenization caused by the global flows of information through the process of globalization. Appadurai (1996) created a framework of five different dimensions within which both discursive and material realities flow: ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes and ideoscapes. Drawing upon the concept of a landscape, these –scapes of imaginary flow within globalization also follow contours and irregularities. In addition, Appadurai (1996) noted that, like landscapes these –scapes:

> …also indicate that these are not objectively given relations that look the same
> from every angle of vision but, rather, that they are deeply perspectival constructs,

inflected by the historical, linguistic, and political situatedness of different sorts of actors: nation-states, multinationals, diasporic communities, as well as subnational groupings and movements…and even intimate face-to-face groups, such as villages, neighborhoods, and families. (p. 33).

For the purposes of this project proposal, particular attention will be paid to the techno- and media- scapes, however, this research will keep in mind the other of Appadurai's scapes because of the interconnectedness of the –scapes, where a change in one often creates a ripple effect in the others.

According to Appadurai (1996), a technoscape is "…a global configuration…of technology and the fact that technology, both high and low, both mechanical and information, now moves at high speeds across various kinds of previously impervious boundaries" (p. 34). Similarly, mediascapes "…refer both to the distribution of electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information…which are now available to a growing number of private and public interests throughout the world, and to the images of the world created by these media" (Appadurai, 1996, p. 35). Often, these two –scapes work in tandem, with the technoscape working as the material vehicle for the discursive images and information provided through the mediascape. As information flow becomes more symmetrical, with media users providing content at an increasing rate through the virtual realm, these flows across countries and cultures can often create both conflicting and complementary messages. For example, Tsing (2005) examined the friction that is caused between cultures in the face of globalism. Specifically, Tsing's (2005) ethnographic work in Indonesia uncovered how the physical landscape of the Indonesian rainforests was being fundamentally changed by capitalism and competing factions both within and outside of the country. This friction between different cultures and interests continued to play out for Indonesian citizens after the fall of the Indonesian financial system and the resignation of their president, Suharto, however, now it was playing out in both the physical and the virtual realm. According to Ong (2008), after the Indonesian financial collapse, the Indonesian Chinese population was scapegoated as being the origin for the country's financial problems and were subjected to many of the same human rights violations that other Indonesians had suffered under Suharto's regime. In an effort to document and fight the ethnic cleansing that was taking place in Indonesia, ethnic Chinese from around the world started the *Global Huaren* online (Ong, 2008). While the original intention of the Global Huaren was to shed light on the atrocities occurring in Indonesia against their ethnically Chinese population, the virtual movement inadvertently made the issue worse by confirming the difference between native Indonesians and the Indonesian Chinese. In other words, the Global Huaren effectively essentialized the experience of "being Chinese" on a global scale when all the Indonesian Chinese wanted was to be treated like all other Indonesians and to not have their Chinese heritage highlighted and spotlighted.

Both Tsing (2005) and Ong (2008) highlight two facets of the frictions that can be caused by global flows of information. For Tsing (2005), the friction caused by first world politics and economics converging on the cultural practices of Indonesia in the 1980s and '90s highlights the fact that information, ideas, concepts and ideologies do not necessarily

"flow" from one area to another, but are constantly negotiated and contested in areas she calls "zones of awkward engagements." Both Tsing (2005) and Ong (2008) unpack Indonesia as a zone of awkward engagement where the negotiation of identity ideologies is often contested and fought over. At the crux of the argument, it would seem, is the fact that in both instances of globalization, both before and after the fall of Suharto, there was the essentializing of the Indonesian identity: before it was as a complete nation of "third-world savages" waiting to be brought into modern times by Western ideals; after, it was through the Global Huaren trying to essentialize the racial identity of their Indonesian Chinese brothers and sisters. Both Tsing (2005) and Ong (2008) are effective at highlighting the pitfalls of assuming that one size fits all when it comes to the global dissemination of ideas: one idea, ideology, ethnic, racial, sexual identity fits all.

The use of media to disseminate information through the flow of technoscapes and mediascapes can also be used to de-essentialize identity also. In his essay entitled "New Ethnicities," Stuart Hall (1996) engages in a discussion about the essentialized black figure. Specifically, Hall (1996) stats that the term "black" had been come to signify "…groups and communities with, in fact, very different histories, traditions and ethnic identities" (p. 441). However, in the 1980s, because of access to funding and equipment that was until that point inaccessible, young, black filmmakers are able to start creating films and art that reflect their own multifaceted cultural, ethnic and racial experiences. These filmmakers in Britain were informed and influenced by Third World cinema, Afro-Caribbean culture, aesthetics and traditions of Asia and Africa (Hall, 1996, p. 447). According to Hall (1996), this access to technology and media de-essentializes what it meant to be black and what it meant to be British in the 1980s. The end of the essential black figure in 1980s Britain also required the required the recognition of the intersectionality between different facets of identity—class, gender, sexuality and ethnicity, to name a few. Unlike Ong's (2008) example of the Global Huaren and the Indonesian Chinese population, Hall's (1996) example provides evidence that technoscapes and mediascapes can be used to add texture and nuance to the flattened, essentialized minorities through the use of new communication technologies. What is of particular interest in this research proposal is what the It Gets Better campaign does to the experience of being a gender or sexual minority in the world today through the use of techno- and mediascapes. There is the potential for a simultaneous essentializing and de-essentializing of identity to take place through this accidental social movement: the essentializing of identity could come through the fact that everyone should experience a bettering of their lives if they just tough out being a queer adolescent the same way people in the United States can do, and; the de-essentializing of identity because of the over 50,000 voices from around the world that have given their own version of how it got better for them. One aspect of this project that would be beneficial to understanding accidental social movements in general is to understand how identity is affected when local and national messages reach a global scale.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

This research will combine a content and demographic analysis, and in-depth interviews. The content analysis will be based upon Castells' (2012) framework for examining the

various social movements detailed within *Networks of Outrage and Hope*. Specifically, Castells (2012) stated that: "…my theory will be embedded in a selective observation of the movements, to bring together…the most salient findings of this study in an analytical framework" (p. 17-18). Similarly, I am going to selectively "observe" different aspects of the It Gets Better campaign within the framework of Appadurai's (1990) "-scapes" of the social imaginary, paying close attention to how both the technoscapes and mediascapes are informing and are informed by the flow of information created through the It Gets Better campaign. To do this, a representative sample of the over 50,000 videos will be watched and analyzed for content (what is the message? Who is the intended demographic for the message?) and origin.

For the demographic analysis, particular attention will be paid to where the highest frequency of uploads versus downloads of videos are occurring. This information is usually readily available from Google Analytics. This will help track exactly how the videos and thusly, the messages contained within the videos been disseminated throughout the globe. The interesting thing to notice is to see where exactly the videos are coming from primarily and if there truly is a global audience for them. This is important to note because of the potential for the messages to essentialize the coming out experience for queer youth around the world. If most of the videos originated from the United States, how does the very Western ideal of "it" getting better speak to populations that are still under violent oppression of minority sexualities and genders. Beyond looking at analytics for answers to this, as part of this research project, I will be looking for grant money from the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN). GLSEN is a non-profit organization that specifically works at the K-12 level to make sure that every individual is respected regardless of sexual or gender identity expression ("Our mission," 2013). In securing grant money, I would like to travel to some of the countries outside of the United States to interview queer adolescents with their experiences of being a gender or sexual minority in their country; to understand what the It Gets Better campaign means to them, and; to better understand how accidental social movements like this function outside of both the United States and the virtual realm. Through the combination of content analysis on a selection of the It Gets Better videos and in-depth interviews with members of the target audience for those videos from around the world, a clearer picture should start to develop on how the It Gets Better campaign became first a cultural zeitgeist and then an accidental social movement. In addition, it will also help to understand how the virtual space of the Internet both compliments and complicates the global flow of information during these accidental social movements.

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