Undoing the Given: The Reversal of Gender Stereotypes in Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and Ayobami Adebayo's *Stay with Me*

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Abstract
This paper examines how Lola Shoneyin's The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives and Ayobami Adebayo's Stay with Me expose and unsettle four interlocking gender stereotypes: marriage as the height of human achievement, parenthood as the sole proof of womanhood or manhood, women as innately superior parents, and infertility as a condition belonging to women alone. Reading the two novels through psychoanalytic feminism and David Marx and Sei Jin Ko's account of stereotype formation, the paper argues that Shoneyin and Adebayo locate these beliefs in unconscious social conditioning rather than in nature, and that both novelists stage their collapse through characters who fail to meet a stereotype yet fulfil the need it was meant to satisfy. Baba Segi's tenderness toward children he did not father, Akin's transformation into his adopted daughter's primary carer, and Bolanle's maternal devotion prior to biological motherhood together produce a reversal in which nurture, rather than biology, becomes the true measure of parental legitimacy. The paper concludes that this reversal does not resolve patriarchal injury so much as redistribute it, exposing men and women alike as casualties of the same conditioning.

Keywords: *gender stereotypes; psychoanalytic feminism; patriarchy; parenthood; infertility; Nigerian fiction.*

Introduction

Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, first published in 2010, and Ayobami Adebayo's *Stay with Me*, published in 2017, both open with marriages under strain and close with these marriages stripped of the illusions that sustained them. Baba Segi discovers that his seven children were fathered by other men. Akin conceals his infertility for over a decade before his wife, Yejide, uncovers the deception. The two plots differ in register, Shoneyin working largely through comedy and Adebayo through tragedy, yet they converge on a shared concern: the distance between what a patriarchal order demands of a man or a woman and what its own characters turn out to need from one another. This paper argues that the two novels dramatise that distance through four beliefs that function, in David Marx and Sei Jin Ko's terms, as stereotypes rather than facts: that marriage constitutes the height of human achievement, that parenthood alone proves

womanhood or manhood, that women are innately superior parents to men and that infertility belongs, by social consensus, to women rather than to men. Each belief is tested against a character who fails to satisfy it and, in failing, exposes what the belief was concealing. Bolanle marries Baba Segi to escape the shame of rape rather than for love, telling the reader that Baba Segi's appeal lay in his indifference to her silence, since he "didn't ask questions" and was "content" when she "said nothing" (Shoneyin 16). Marriage functions here as a substitute for the psychological treatment Bolanle never receives, which suggests that a union sanctioned by society as the height of achievement can simultaneously be, for the person entering it, an act of avoidance. Akin raises Rotimi, a child who is his daughter by neither blood nor marriage, with a devotion that his own biological fatherhood, had it existed, was never guaranteed to produce (Adebayo 249-52). Baba Segi's love for his children fathered by other men persists once he learns the truth, which separates paternal feeling from paternal biology in a way the stereotype cannot accommodate (Shoneyin 8). Read together, these moments do not merely criticise patriarchal belief from a position outside the text; they show the belief failing from within the very relationships it was meant to organise.

The reading offered here draws on psychoanalytic feminism, a body of theory that treats gender not as biological destiny but as a structure lodged in the unconscious through early socialisation and reinforced by the symbolic authority of the phallus (Wolff 1). Nancy Chodorow's account of mothering as a socially reproduced role and Jessica Benjamin's analysis of domination as a relational rather than purely economic structure both inform the argument that stereotypes survive less through open coercion than through internalised expectation. Faith Ben-Daniels and Nathaniel Glover-Meni's comparative study of masculinity in the two novels reads a similar asymmetry into the men of both households, which suggests that the pressures examined here are not incidental features of two unrelated plots but a shared preoccupation of Nigerian fiction dealing with marriage and reproduction in this period (53-69).

Theoretical Frameworks

Stereotype carries a precise meaning in the account this paper follows. Marx and Ko define stereotypes as "widely generalised beliefs about the behaviours and attributes possessed by individuals from certain social groups", beliefs that are "often unchanging even in the face of contradicting information" and that supply "an underlying justification for prejudice" (1). Two features of this definition matter for reading Shoneyin and Adebayo. Because stereotypes generalise, they hold regardless of the individual case, which is why Baba Segi continues to trade on a reputation for virility even as evidence of his sterility accumulates around him. Because they resist contradiction, Akin's mother continues to press Yejide over their childlessness across nine years of marriage rather than suspect her own son (Adebayo 27-28). Psychoanalytic feminism supplies the second strand of the framework. Where earlier feminist critics such as Kate Millett and Simone de Beauvoir analysed patriarchy chiefly as a structure of social and economic domination, psychoanalytic feminists such as Chodorow and Benjamin locate gender inequality earlier, in the unconscious patterning of the psyche during infancy and childhood. Chodorow argues that the sexual division of labour reproduces itself across generations because women, who remain primarily responsible for early child care, raise daughters who identify with them and sons who must separate from them, a difference she treats as predisposing women toward relational nurture and men toward autonomous control. Benjamin extends this claim by arguing that domination is not simply imposed by men upon women from outside the relationship but is produced within the intersubjective structure of desire itself, so that both parties can become invested, consciously or not, in sustaining an unequal bond. This paper treats the four stereotypes

named above as symptoms of such unconscious investment rather than as beliefs freely chosen, which explains why a character who has herself suffered under a stereotype can nonetheless enforce it on her own child. Iya Segi's mother, whose own marriage has already ended, still forces her daughter into one, reversing an earlier admission that "some don't need husbands" the moment her daughter repeats it back to her (Shoneyin 101). The phallus occupies a specific place within psychoanalytic feminist theory that clarifies Baba Segi's behaviour once his fertility is questioned. In Lacanian-inflected psychoanalytic feminism, the phallus functions not as the anatomical organ but as a symbol of authority and lack around which subjectivity and social hierarchy are organised (Wolff 1). Baba Segi's reaction to his suspected infertility can be read through this distinction rather than through biology alone. His narrated anxiety centres not on fatherhood as an experience but on an audience of other men, since he recalls having "boasted of his conquest" two years earlier and worries over how he "will tell the men that all his pounding had proved futile" (Shoneyin 4). Set against Wolff's account of the symbolic phallus, Baba Segi's panic indicates that what patriarchal ideology names virility functions as a currency of standing among men, a currency that Bolanle's supposed barrenness threatens to devalue independently of who is biologically responsible for it. Gift T. Baloyi's clinical reminder that infertility "is not a female problem" but "a human problem" exposes the currency as a fiction that the novels' plots are structured to correct (6). Mary Becker's definition of patriarchy as a system that organises status hierarchically along the axis of sex, so that men accrue authority simply by occupying the category "man" rather than by any individual accomplishment, supplies a structural counterpart to the psychological account offered by Chodorow and Benjamin. Where Becker locates the mechanism in institutions, law, inheritance, custom, the two novels locate its daily operation in speech: in a mother's comparison between sons, in a father's remark about women who work beside rather than behind their husbands, in a wife's own insistence that she alone can keep a household calm. The stereotype, on this account, is patriarchy's smallest working unit, the sentence-level form a structural hierarchy takes when it needs to reproduce itself inside a single household rather than through a court or a title deed. The analysis that follows tests this framework against four areas of textual evidence: marriage, parenthood, the presumption of maternal superiority and the gendering of infertility.

Textual Analysis

i) Marriage as the Height of Achievement

Marriage in both novels' functions less as a bond between two people than as a certificate of social admission, and the clearest evidence for this lies in how little the marriages have to do with the partners who enter them. Bolanle does not marry Baba Segi for companionship. She recalls that "it all made perfect sense" when she met him, because she "would be with a man who accepted" her and "didn't ask questions or find" her "quietness unsettling" (Shoneyin 16). Ezinwanyi Adam's observation that a woman is "defined rationally" through her attachments to men, "as mother, wife, daughter, mistress, concubine or as whore", clarifies why Bolanle's escape takes precisely this form (Adam 6). If a woman's significance is measured by her attachment to a man, marriage becomes the fastest available route to significance, whatever the marriage subsequently demands of her. Iya Tope's entry into the same household follows a related but distinct logic. Her father tells her that "men want women who can work beside them on the farm, not behind them", before asking whether she is troubled that "no one has turned their mouths to talk about marrying her" (Shoneyin 79). The remark reduces her to unclaimed stock, a reduction the novel makes explicit soon afterward when she recalls being handed to Baba Segi as compensation "for the failed crops", so that she becomes, in her own account, "just like the tubers of cassava in a basket" (Shoneyin

82). Where Bolanle's marriage disguises trauma as escape, Iya Tope's disguises an economic transaction as a rite of passage. Both disguises rest on the same social premise Gift T. Baloyi identifies elsewhere in the analysis of infertility: that an unmarried woman is made to feel inferior to her married counterpart regardless of the circumstances under which the marriage occurs (4).

Iya Segi's mother supplies the sharpest instance of the stereotype perpetuating itself across generations, since she has already suffered a failed marriage and nonetheless forces her daughter into one. When Iya Segi protests, quoting her mother's own earlier words, that "some don't need husbands", the mother reverses her position entirely: "You do. You need to bear children. The world has no patience for spinsters. It spits them out" (Shoneyin 101). This is not simple hypocrisy so much as an instance of what Chodorow's model of reproduced mothering would predict, since a woman who has internalised the belief that her worth depends on marriage transmits that belief to her daughter even where her own experience contradicts it. The mother goes as far as transferring her daughter's accumulated wealth to the prospective husband so that "he will not be emasculated by his wife after marriage", protecting not only the institution of marriage but the male ego on which the institution has been made to rest (Shoneyin 100). Iya Femi's route into the household adds a further variation rather than repeating the pattern already established by Bolanle and Iya Tope. She absconds with Baba Segi as the first man willing to accommodate her, treating marriage as an escape from a troubled life rather than as a considered choice, and her desperation to secure her place leads her to conceal a pregnancy achieved outside the marriage before Iya Segi eventually exposes the deception. Where Bolanle's marriage disguises trauma and Iya Tope's disguises a transaction, Iya Femi's disguises a lie that the institution itself all but requires her to tell, since a childless wife in this household has already been shown, through Bolanle's and Yejide's experience, to occupy a precarious position that pregnancy alone is understood to secure. The fact that three women arrive at the same household by three distinct routes, escape, transaction and concealment, and are absorbed into an identical requirement once inside indicates that the stereotype operates independently of any individual woman's circumstances.

Yejide's case in Adebayo's novel completes the pattern by showing what happens when a marriage is entered without the same coercion and still fails to deliver on the stereotype's promise. Orphaned young and raised among relatives she describes as unkind, Yejide accepts Akin's proposal in what reads, initially, as a genuine wish for a home of her own rather than as capitulation to social pressure. The marriage nonetheless collapses into the same demand that structures Bolanle's and Iya Tope's unions, since Yejide is soon required to prove her worth through childbearing regardless of her original motive for marrying. Four women enter marriage for four different reasons and arrive at the same requirement, which suggests that the stereotype does not depend on any individual woman's motive; it operates on the institution itself, absorbing whatever brings a woman into it and subjecting her, once inside, to an identical proof of value.

ii) *Parenthood and the Phallic Economy of Gender*

If marriage supplies entry into respectability, parenthood in both novels supplies its confirmation, and the two texts stage this confirmation in strikingly asymmetrical, gendered terms. For a man, the capacity to father children functions less as a private biological fact than as the symbolic phallus discussed above, a currency of standing among other men. Baba Segi's fear when he suspects Bolanle of barrenness has little to do with wanting more children; it concerns an audience, since his earlier claim of "conquest" was always aimed at other men rather than at the woman he claims to have conquered (Shoneyin 4). Akin's crisis runs on an identical circuit. His mother reminds him, unprompted, that his half-brother Juwon "already had four children, all boys", a

comparison that has nothing to do with his marriage to Yejide and everything to do with his rank among his father's sons (Adebayo 28). Fatherhood functions, in both novels, less as a relation to a child than as a credential circulated among men, which is precisely what Gift T. Baloyi's insistence that infertility "must be understood" as "a human problem" is written to correct (6).

The novels dismantle this credentialing logic most forcefully through counter-example rather than argument, and the clearest counter-example is Akin's relationship with Rotimi, an infant abandoned by her biological mother because of her sickle-cell condition. Akin is not Rotimi's biological father, a fact the narrative keeps continuously in view, yet his account of becoming her carer reads as a more convincing initiation into fatherhood than anything his own contested paternity ever produced. He recalls being woken at five each morning by her crying and choosing, almost involuntarily, to comfort her himself rather than pass her to Yejide, since "Rotimi stopped crying once she was in" his "arms" (Adebayo 250). The scene culminates when the child first calls him "Baba", a word Akin says "lifted the crushing weight of Dotun's letters and all my mistakes just a bit" (Adebayo 251). Set beside his earlier preoccupation with male standing, this moment relocates paternal legitimacy from biological transmission to daily, unglamorous care, a relocation the novel confirms when Akin admits that he had once believed, echoing his mother's own maxim, that "there is no way to be in this world without an offspring", only to discover through Rotimi that the belief was never really about offspring at all (Adebayo 255).

Baba Segi undergoes a parallel, if less introspective, reversal. When the paternity of his children is exposed as false, the stereotype would predict humiliation followed by rejection. Baba Segi instead continues to call each child "by his/her names, from the eldest to the youngest", making "each child feels extraordinary" in a household where his biological connection to them has just been publicly disproved (Shoneyin 8). His conduct indicates that whatever bound him to the children was never the biological fact the stereotype requires, since that fact has turned out to be false, and the bond persists regardless. The novel's own structure supplies the necessary contrast in Taju, the biological father of some of the children, who avoids his responsibilities the moment his paternity is confirmed rather than deceived. It is the man whose reproductive claim is genuine who withdraws, while the men whose reproductive standing has collapsed, Baba Segi through discovered deception and Akin through medically confirmed infertility, become the more committed fathers. The pattern is too consistent across both novels to read as coincidence: in each case, the character whose biological claim to fatherhood is intact or restored, Taju, and to a lesser extent Baba Segi in the period before his sterility becomes known, treats fatherhood as a status to be defended rather than a practice to be performed, while the character whose biological claim has failed treats it as work. Chodorow's account of gendered psychic development, developed originally to explain why women are drawn toward relational nurture, applies here with the genders reassigned. It is Akin, not Yejide, who is forced by circumstance into the relational, hands-on role Chodorow associates with mothering, which suggests that the capacity for nurture Chodorow locates in early psychic formation is not sex-specific so much as role-specific, activated in whichever parent is compelled by circumstance to perform it. This reassignment matters beyond the individual case of Akin, since it implies that the entire architecture of gendered parenting Chodorow describes rests on a division of early caregiving labour that is historically contingent rather than psychically fixed: change who answers the five o'clock crying, and the psychic structure Chodorow attributes to womanhood attaches itself instead to whoever answers.

iii) Women as Ostensibly Natural Parents

The corollary stereotype, that women possess an innate superiority in parenting that men structurally lack, receives comparable treatment from both novelists, though the textual evidence concentrates more heavily in Shoneyin. Bolanle, who has no biological children through most of the novel, performs the labour of mothering her co-wife's children well before she performs it for any child of her own. She resolves early in her marriage to win the children's affection through patient attention rather than material bribery alone, promising herself that "one day, they will all love me" and that she "will be a big sister" to Segi, telling her "everything about the world outside" so that Segi "doesn't make the mistakes" Bolanle made (Shoneyin 23). The promise is honoured in small, recorded acts: coaching Akin's English homework, warning the younger children away from a dangerous pole, praising Akin's decorum until he looks the word up in a dictionary out of curiosity (Shoneyin 23, 46). These are not the acts of a woman whose maternal capacity is activated by childbirth. They are the acts of a woman whose maternal capacity precedes childbirth altogether, a precedence the novel confirms when Segi, Iya Segi's own biological daughter, chooses to spend her final moments with Bolanle rather than with her birth mother.

Iya Segi's own claim to maternal authority, by contrast, rests on accomplishment and status rather than on relational care. She tells the reader that she alone "can approve vengeance" and that she alone "know[s] how to bring calm" in the household, a claim to feminine indispensability the novel undercuts by showing her guarding wealth and rank rather than nurturing her children's development (Shoneyin 104). The distance between Iya Segi's self-description and Bolanle's quiet accumulation of the children's trust suggests that the stereotype of women as natural parents' functions, within the novel, as a claim woman are themselves pressured to assert whether or not their conduct supports it. Adam's account of a woman's significance being fixed by her relational role to others explains why Iya Segi has no other currency to claim once her wealth has already passed to her husband (Adam 6). Akin's account of Rotimi's upbringing extends this critique from the domestic scene to the household's structure. He notes that once Rotimi was born, the growing pile of baby items Yejide left in his room signalled a division of labour he had never actively negotiated but had simply inherited, a habit rather than a law of nature: fathers are assumed to be absent because fathers are, in practice, permitted to be absent, and mothers are assumed to be present because mothers are, in practice, left without an alternative. Once Akin disrupts the habit through daily involvement, Rotimi grows into an adult who bears the abandoning mother no grudge, which implies that the stereotype of maternal necessity was protecting a domestic arrangement convenient to fathers rather than protecting children as such. The claim that women parent better by nature therefore performs a double function across the two novels, and it is worth separating the two. It excuses men such as Baba Segi's other husbands' fathers and Taju from daily involvement in their children's upbringing by treating that involvement as naturally the mother's province, and it simultaneously burdens women such as Iya Segi with a standard of instinctive competence that her own conduct, self-interested and status-driven, does not meet. Bolanle meets that standard without possessing the biological qualification the stereotype claims to require, and Akin meets it despite belonging to the sex the stereotype excludes from it by definition. Between them, the two characters empty the stereotype of the very content, biological or sex-based competence, that gives it its persuasive force.

iv) Barrenness and the Gendering of Biological Failure

The fourth stereotype, that infertility properly belongs to women, receives the most sustained attention in both novels because it is the mechanism through which the other three stereotypes are

enforced. Baloyi states the medical case without qualification: infertility "is not a female problem; it is a human problem and must be understood as such", since men are as biologically susceptible to it as women (6). Both novels dramatise the gap between this medical fact and its social suppression through husbands who are, in fact, the infertile partner yet who escape suspicion until the plot forces disclosure. Baba Segi is eventually revealed, through medical testing prompted by Bolanle's education, to be the sterile party, yet his response to his own suspected infertility before that revelation is not self-examination but blame, directed first at Bolanle and, by implication, at women who fail to conceive more generally (Shoneyin 4). Akin conceals his infertility from Yejide for years, permitting her to undergo a punishing round of consultations and remedies in pursuit of a pregnancy his own silence has already made impossible, a concealment his mother's growing impatience with Yejide only intensifies (Adebayo 27-28). Ben-Daniels and Glover-Meni's comparative reading of masculinity across the two novels frames such concealment as a symptom of a wider cultural refusal to admit male reproductive vulnerability at all, a refusal that operates independently of any individual man's character (53-69). Akin is neither cruel nor indifferent to Yejide's suffering; he simply lacks a script, socially or linguistically, for disclosing a condition his own upbringing has taught him to treat as unspeakable in a man.

The asymmetry sharpens once each man's condition becomes known. Baba Segi's exposure produces public shame that the narrative treats with some sympathy, since his ignorance is shown to be conditioned by cultural expectation rather than chosen. Akin's concealment produces no comparable exposure within the marriage; instead, Yejide's illicit relationship with her brother-in-law, undertaken in desperation, ends in the birth of children affected by sickle-cell anaemia, compounding rather than resolving the crisis the concealment created. Where Baba Segi's community eventually redirects its judgement once the truth surfaces, Yejide is never vindicated in the same way, since her husband's condition is never publicly revealed and she alone continues to carry the social cost of a barrenness that was never hers. This uneven distribution of consequence is the clearest evidence in either novel that the stereotype survives not because it is believed with equal conviction by everyone, but because the cost of disbelieving it falls so unevenly that few characters can afford to test it openly. Both novels extend this asymmetry into a wider pattern that might be called the gendering of human conditions generally: because women occupy what the narratives frame as the socially subordinate half of a binary opposition, any negative condition attached to reproduction gravitates toward them by default, so that a hasty accusation of barrenness becomes almost a reflex rather than a considered judgement. The reflex is strong enough that it outlives its own evidence. Even once medical or narrative proof shifts blame onto a husband, as it eventually does for Baba Segi, the accusation does not simply transfer to him; it lingers, undiminished, as a property of women as a category, which is why the narratives can present a husband's exposure as a personal humiliation for that husband without dislodging barrenness from its association with womanhood in general. Marx and Ko's observation that stereotypes persist "even in the face of contradicting information" supplies the theoretical vocabulary for this persistence (1). Even after Baba Segi's sterility is medically confirmed, the word "barren" retains what the novel figures as an exclusively feminine association, evidence that the stereotype does not simply misdescribe individual men and women but has reorganised the language available for describing reproductive failure at all. Bolanle, doubly a victim, first of the rape that drove her into marriage and then of the accusation that follows her failure to conceive, accepts the verdict against her with a passivity the novel presents as learned rather than natural, since she has been taught since childhood that a woman's worth is judged by her usefulness to a man. Baba Segi's own accusation against her collapses only when the medical evidence becomes undeniable, which

indicates that the stereotype does not yield to reason so much as to proof, and that proof of this kind is rarely sought until a marriage has already been damaged by its absence.

Conclusion

Reading *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and *Stay With Me* together against Marx and Ko's model of stereotype persistence and against psychoanalytic feminism's account of unconscious gender conditioning reveals a pattern the two novels share despite their different tones: every stereotype examined here is disproved by a character who continues, nonetheless, to suffer under it. Baba Segi's affection for children he did not father does not spare him public shame once the deception is revealed. Akin's devotion to Rotimi does not undo the years Yejide spent blaming herself for a condition that was hers. The novels therefore reveal a reading in which exposing a stereotype as false is sufficient to dismantle its social force, since Shoneyin and Adebayo are careful to show the stereotype's institutional consequences outlasting its factual collapse within the story. This has a consequence for how the reversal of gender roles in both texts should be interpreted. Akin's transformation into Rotimi's primary carer and Bolanle's early maternal devotion to her co-wife's children are frequently read, and were read within the analysis above, as evidence that nurture rather than biology determines parental legitimacy. That reading remains sound, but it should not be mistaken for the novels' final position on gender itself, since neither Akin nor Bolanle escapes the psychological cost the stereotype exacted before their respective reversals occurred: Akin's marriage still ends, and Bolanle still carries the trauma that drove her into it in the first place. What the two novels dramatise, more precisely, is that the psychoanalytic structures Chodorow and Benjamin describe do not simply assign privilege to men and injury to women in a fixed distribution; they distribute injury to whoever occupies the position the stereotype has already defined, man or woman, parent or child, so that the abolition of one stereotype, as both novels suggest through the persistence of the word "barren" even after Baba Segi's condition is known, tends to leave the underlying structure of gendered blame intact and simply awaiting its next occasion. This has a further implication for how the two novels should be situated relative to one another. Shoneyin's comic register allows Baba Segi's household to arrive at something resembling repair: he keeps his children; his wives remain under his roof and the narrative closes without the marriage's dissolution. Adebayo's tragic register permits no equivalent settlement; Akin's marriage to Yejide ends, his second wife dies, and the children born of Yejide's affair inherit a genetic condition neither parent intended for them. The difference suggests that a stereotype's collapse produces different outcomes depending on how much institutional and emotional infrastructure survives its exposure, since Baba Segi's household retains enough goodwill among its members to absorb the shock of discovered deception, while Akin and Yejide's marriage, already strained by a decade of concealment, has none left to draw on. Genre, in other words, is not incidental to this argument but part of its evidence: comedy and tragedy register two different amounts of damage a single stereotype can do to a household before the household's own resources for repair are exhausted, and reading the novels together rather than separately makes that difference visible in a way neither text can show on its own. A final point follows from this comparison and extends rather than restates the argument made above. If the amount of damage a stereotype inflicts depends on the goodwill already available within a household before the stereotype is tested, then the stereotype itself is not the sole object worth studying in fiction of this kind; a household's prior reserves of trust, patience and attachment matter just as much to the outcome. Shoneyin's polygynous household, whatever its cruelties, has built up over the years a network of relationships, Bolanle's bond with the other wives' children among them, that Akin and

Yejide's more conventional marriage never had the chance to develop. Read this way, the novels suggest that resistance to patriarchal stereotype is not primarily a matter of individual conviction or courage, since Baba Segi never consciously resists anything, but a by-product of whatever relational infrastructure a household happens to possess when the stereotype's underlying claim is finally tested against the evidence.

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