

## **Becoming ... in the Midst/Wide-Awake/In-Between: An In-Process Narrative Inquiry**

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Using the frame of the artist's in-process critique, this article presents the author's ongoing theoretical inquiries and reflections on a narrative inquiry. Drawing on Clandinin and Connelly's conceptions and Maxine Greene's writings on aesthetic education, narrative inquiry is explored as a methodology where being in the midst requires wide-awakeness to ourselves and the Other—it is a space of fluidity and possibility. By considering narrative inquiry as an active, relational, and incessant process of meaning-making, the author comes to re/consider the constructivist underpinnings of her previous work with different theories that have allowed her to create new understandings of narrative practice. Through a relational and processual ontology, possibilities for narrative inquiry emerge as a productive shift in narrative inquiry toward becoming.

When, however, a person chooses to view herself or himself  
in the midst of things, as beginner or learner or explorer,  
and has the imagination to envisage new things emerging,  
more and more begins to seem possible.  
(Greene, 1995, p. 22)

My background in visual arts education supports the notion that a work-in-process is a work worth sharing. While most researchers shield their rough ideas, emerging codes, drafts, and questions from public consumption, visual artists are typically open to the opportunity to receive feedback on artworks at all stages of development. That proverbial moment when artists step back from the work-in-process and pause with head tilted and brow furrowed often allows them to see the image much differently than they see the arms-length view available when they are hard at work. Inviting someone else into the studio provides yet another tilted head, furrowed brow, and unique lens through which the developing artwork is viewed and understood. Artists call this the *in-process critique*. During the critique, feedback is solicited, impending decisions are

debated, and productive dialogue often carries artists to a deeper space of introspection. It is through these moments that artists are encouraged to reflect, pushed to question, and have their eyes opened to envision possibilities. The value of the in-process critique also extends to the Others, the critique partners, as they refine their attentiveness to the details within the artwork and (re)consider their own artistic practice. Because this step of the artistic journey has material effects, it has led me to consider what it means to be in-process both in art and in inquiry. Is our research only in-process as we create in the studio and/or as we generate and analyze field texts and write our findings? As I have found in the years after my doctoral degree was awarded, my dissertation study still haunts me like a work-in-process and my understandings of content and methodology feel incomplete. There is a yearning for the scrutiny an in-process critique affords. How might we, as narrative inquirers, begin to embrace this incompleteness, this perception of our inquiries as incessantly in-process, and continually critique our practice?

The inspiration for this article, my dissertation study, explored student lived experiences in a Transdisciplinary Design Studio I co-taught with an instructor-researcher from engineering, Dr. Nicola Sochacka, in the fall of 2012. This study was situated under the umbrella of a larger grant, funded by the National Science Foundation,<sup>1</sup> in which I worked as a graduate research assistant with professors from both engineering and art education, the latter of which comprised my home discipline.<sup>2</sup> Though the grant explored synergistic learning in the Transdisciplinary Design Studio, my dissertation study sought to understand how students narrated their conceptions of creative and disciplinary identity as they navigated through this educational space—visual-verbal narratives, or narratives as expressed through image, spoken, and written text (Guyotte, 2014; Guyotte, Sochacka, Costantino, Kellam, & Walther, 2015).

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Through exploring stories of student experience, I crafted my study as a narrative inquiry. In narrative inquiry, the researcher occupies a space similar to the in-process one described above—nebulous, evolving, and often uncomfortable. Clandinin (2013) presented this methodology as assuming the relational when stories are concurrently lived and told, where meaning-making is collaborative and incessant, and where the storied lives of participant and researcher are intertwined. Due to the relational ontology of narrative inquiry (Clandinin, Caine, Estefan, Huber, Murphy, & Steeves, 2015), Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and Clandinin (2013) impelled researchers to assume their place *in the midst*. Being in the midst requires the researcher to acknowledge the participant as in-process and social beings. This state requires an attentiveness on the part of the researcher—a constant and active inquiry into the co-constructed narratives of experience. In the words of Greene (1995), researchers must strive for a *wide-awakeness* to the Other. How do we come to view/understand our Selves and Others as part of an interrelational web (Arendt, 1958/1998)? How do we, then, begin to see our lives as entangling through our living inquiries? Rather than perceive the Self and Other as static beings, the notion of wide-awakeness brings one to consider *becomings*—incessant co-constructions that are never complete, as the Self is always in flux.

As a visual artist/teacher/inquirer, I find myself fascinated with becoming *in-process* and in-process *becomings*. To be sure, the relational ontology of narrative inquiry might also be explored as a processual ontology. Though at the time I did not look to the work of post-structuralist and new materialist scholars, I still consider my work ongoing. Motivated by the in-process critique, I have thus been inspired to undertake a new understanding of what it means to become—what one my students noted in a reflection of the class—*in-between*. In what follows, I put my previous constructivist conceptions in interaction with new theoretical notions even as I acknowledge the incessantly ongoing nature of such understandings. These understandings evolve, move, resist, and cause me to stumble. Even as narratives are expected to have a beginning, middle, and end, I find myself always simultaneously present and shifting in-between the middles of my own living inquiries.

In this article, I investigate my ongoing middles and my living-inquiry as in-process through re/engaging with my dissertation study. I begin by presenting my theoretical inquiries and reflections with an introduction to three states of being that initially grounded yet also emerged from my study: *in the midst*, *wide-awake*, and *in-between*. Next,

I present an excerpt from a memo I wrote while engaging in field text analysis as signaling a transition in my methodological thinking in the middle of my study with regard to narrative inquiry. I then move to a conceptual exploration of both becoming in-process and in-process becoming— notions that have followed me since the “completion” of my study—with a renewed theoretical lens that draws from post-structuralism and new materialism. Finally, implications of narrative inquiry methodology are brought forth. I invite the reader into the studio to stand with me—head tilted, brow furrowed, and eyes wide-awake as I inquire into my work-in-process.

### **Three Spaces of “Becoming...”**

In reading the classic narrative inquiry text written by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), I conceptualized what it meant to be a narrative inquirer. Considering their notion of being in the midst provided me with a means understanding what it meant to “be” with my participants. This, alongside Maxine Greene’s writings (1995, 2001) on aesthetic pedagogy, which comprised the theoretical framework of my dissertation, invoked a consideration of the relational side of narrative inquiry through a focus on Greene’s construct of wide-awakeness. One student’s utterance in a written reflection brought together the relational and the in-process in my study. It was these three concepts that initially emerged as highly influential as I immersed myself in my first narrative inquiry. In what follows, I introduce three spaces of becoming—in the midst, wide-awake, and in-between—as emergent in my research inquiry.

#### **In the Midst**

In their explorations of narrative inquiry, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and Clandinin (2013) discussed the importance of occupying a three-dimensional space that encompasses time, sociality, and place. It is these dimensions that are pivotal in the understanding and construction of narratives; and it is *in* these dimensions that Clandinin and Connelly asserted that narrative inquirers should situate themselves. By understanding the impact of the three-dimensions on spaces in which researchers and participants live and interact, the researchers begin to view their lives as paralleling, intersecting, and unfolding alongside that of the participant—as relational. In other words, researchers move into research spaces already *in the midst* just as participants are already in the

midst of their own lives (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Clandinin (2013) elucidated:

As participants' and researchers' lives meet in the midst of each of our unfolding complex and multiple experiences, we begin to shape time, places, and spaces where we come together and negotiate ways of being together and ways of giving accounts of our work together. What we need to think about here is the sense that it is not only the participants' and researchers' lives in the midst but also the nested set of lives in which each of us live. (p. 44)

Therefore, being in the midst requires an active effort on the part of researchers to view themselves as part of the narrative landscape through which participants construct and simultaneously traverse.

A collective inquiry into the participant-researcher experience requires an ongoing interaction. Theoretically underlying Clandinin and Connelly's conceptions of narrative inquiry is Dewey's (1938/1997) notion of experience, which encompasses the principles of interaction and continuity. The principle of interaction embraces lived experience as both situated and constructed in social relationships, and continuity acknowledges that experiences are not isolated events but that each new one builds from prior experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Being in the midst nudges participants and researchers into an incessant and intersubjective state where past, present, and future thoughts and expressions all comprise the meaning-making process. As Clandinin (2013) explained, "We, as inquirers and participants, begin and end each narrative inquiry in the midst" (p. 82). Thus I strove to embody such thinking as I engaged with the student-participants. For instance, it was one student's struggle with the collaborative group work required in the course that became the predominant theme in her narrative as I witnessed it unfolding. However, in engaging further with her field texts, I realized that her struggles derived from highly insular experiences in her previous degree program—she had never *had* to collaborate; rather, she had been expected to create individually. Being in the midst and sensitive to these previous experiences allowed me greater insight into her experiences with collaboration and nurtured the co-construction of a more complex and nuanced research narrative.

## Wide-Awake

In *Releasing the Imagination*, Greene (1995) defined wide-awakeness as an “awareness of what it is to be in the world” (p. 35) through which “persons [become] conscious of their own consciousness” (p. 65). Greene explained that this consciousness is ever-reaching as it “is in part defined by the way it always reaches beyond itself toward a fullness and a completeness that can never be attained. If it were attained, there would be a stoppage, a petrification. There would be no need for a quest” (p. 26). As our lifeworld is in flux, our consciousness must evolve through our interactions in and with the world. These interactions are persistent; therefore, our awareness is like an indecisive potter’s clay vessel that is constantly smashed, re/envisioned, and transformed. Unlike clay, which will eventually dry as moisture is sapped through its reworking, our awareness retains a resilience which allows us to continually re/imagine our place in and of the world.

In Greene’s (1995) conception of wide-awakeness, the imagination is an essential capacity as it enables individuals to envision “possibilities for their own becoming and their group’s becoming” (p. 39). It requires imagination and an active attentiveness that gazes both inward and outward—as being wide-awake is not simply achieved, but must also be perceived as an act of becoming. In this way, the very nature of human *being* is human *becoming* as we resist what Greene called the “stoppage” or “petrification” of consciousness. Wide-awakeness, then, is interdependent with the researcher’s ability to remain conscious of both the Self and the Other as interconnected and entangling. As such, wide-awakeness became part of my relational movements in the study in various ways. In one instance during field text analysis, I came across two pages in a student’s visual journal that had been carefully taped together. Though never seriously contemplated, the thought slipped into my mind that the tape could be removed without the student-participant knowing. It was, however, the process of becoming wide-awake that led me to consider the ethical implications of such an action, the intrinsic and extrinsic reverberations that might ensue. I kept the tape intact, realizing the productive possibilities in the consciousness and conscience I carried with respect to the student—and all the students—involved in the study.

## In-Between

Expanding beyond the concepts of being in the midst and wide-awakeness brings forth another important consideration—an idea that is decisively entangled in my research. I affectionately call this space the “in-between,” as inspired by the words of one participant, Marissa,<sup>3</sup> when she reflected on the design studio at the end of the semester. She wrote in her final reflective paper that the experience took her “from meeting new people from art education, landscape architecture, graduate school and undergrad like me, to the books we read and design challenges we created and *all the lovely in-between....*” (emphasis added).

The in-between is brought forth by Marissa as encompassing all of the moments that do not neatly fit into the experiential categories she names; perhaps they defy categorization, or perhaps they are even ineffable. In some way, Marissa captured many aspects of my research interest, the narrative methodology, and the essence of the design studio in this one hyphenated word—*in-between*. The concept of the in-between conjures up notions of the students as in-process beings, the Transdisciplinary Design Studio as comprising an in-between space between disciplines, being in the midst and wide-awakeness as creating the in-between space amongst researcher and participant, and even my study as an incessant work-in-process inhabiting the in-between. The in-between is constant yet ever-changing, but I cannot help but feel drawn to seek understandings of this fluid concept.

Though the concept of the in-between can certainly refer to the relational facets of narrative inquiry (Caine & Steeves, 2009), I am presenting the in-between in this article as reflecting an in-process state. It reflects the construction of self and the construction of knowledge as ongoing, where unfolding narratives are simultaneously entangling and unraveling based on our interactions with the other. Through each resolution, individuals are still grappling with unresolved narratives that keep them in a constant state of in-between. Such tensions are what keep us alive, according to Greene (1995). Hence, the in-between is not simply a respite as individuals move from one point to another, but becomes

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<sup>3</sup> Names of students appearing in this article are pseudonyms.

something altogether different as it engages with/in a relational and processual ontology, as I discuss in more detail in the next section.

In the midst, wide-awake, and in-between are all concepts that became integral to my dissertation study as it was undertaken. They inspired my early in-process movements as I generated and analyzed field texts, as well as writing up this study. It was, however, the process of writing as inquiry (Richardson, 2000) through a researcher memo that brought me to question the very methodology of narrative inquiry—a methodology that emphasized the beginnings, middles, and ends of co-constructed narratives. Intricately entangled in the aforementioned concepts, I continued to consider their implications amidst such questioning.

### **Interlude: A Researcher Memo**

*September 25, 2013*

*As I am going through [my] field texts, I am struck by an idea that I need to consider with regard to my study. In many of these participant texts, I am uncovering an explicit narrative of experience that often surfaces in the final reflective papers [of the undergraduate participants]. This narrative is conceptually more polished as I can tell the student has spent time thinking about [his/her] ideas and organizing their thoughts into an academic-type paper. On the other hand, the focus groups and visual journals bring forth a rougher depiction of experience. These ideas are still emergent/evolving and are not fully developed. I can see these latter narratives as interesting but often I don't get a holistic picture of the narrative—often just snippets are made apparent. It is tempting to just focus on the more complete narratives of experience but I need to be mindful that partial glimpses might be just as powerful and poignant. Do we always need a definitive border that demarcates the narrative—a beginning, middle, end? Can we find value in these snippets, these narratives-in-process? I imagine many individuals would find this problematic but I find myself drawn to this idea since, really, student-participants do not always leave the research context at a concluding point and are sometimes residing in the middle of their stories. Well, let's be honest, they are always still in the middle of their stories. **Why is it, then, that we are so compelled to tie the loose ends together in our presentations of the study?***



### Re/Considering the Narrative Process

In the memo above, I wrote about my challenges in resolving the tensions between the participants' more polished narratives that contained resolutions (the final reflective papers) and those that were messy, ambiguous, and unresolved (the focus group dialogue and visual journal jottings). At the time I composed this memo, I was unfamiliar with Gergen and Gergen's (2011) perceived tensions in narrative inquiry; however, the ideas I expressed are grounded in the tension described by these authors as *structure vs. process*. In the field of narrative inquiry, researchers tend to place emphasis on either the process or the structure of narratives. Striano (2012) also pointed out that, traditionally, "narrative studies and practices have focused mainly on the *products* rather than on the *process* of narrating" (p. 148), whereas, in the latter, factors like culture and social interaction are valued. As a means of attending to and subsequently integrating the tensions they discussed, Gergen and Gergen (2011) suggested a relational constructionist perspective which views process and form as related, rather than competing, facets of narrative. In other words, one does not have to choose one over the other but can see process as giving way to structure and structure as "reiterative, sustained, or broadly shared" (p. 379).

In considering Gergen and Gergen's (2011) relational constructivist approach, I initially began to see my conception of narrative being strengthened if I viewed the in-process snippets that the participants composed throughout the semester as ultimately contributing to the more polished narratives that often surfaced within the final papers. In this way, I think about the papier-mâché sculptures that my students created when I taught visual art in a public school. Their process would begin by making wire armatures, which served as support structures and provided an outline for the form as it transformed from flat to multi-dimensional. Even though the wire was often no longer visible when the sculpture was complete, the armature was essential to the creation of the form. The unresolved and in-between narratives of the participants function very much like the wire armatures as they contribute to the form and strength of the narrative product. If we disregard these stories of the in-between, the overall narrative is weak and lacks dimension and strength, much like the papier-mâché sculptures. How, though, might we re/envision the sculptures, our narrative products themselves, as incomplete works-in-process? What are the implications for being in the midst, becoming wide-awake, and the in-between for such a vision?

These are the questions I take up next, questions that continue to pulse years after writing this memo.

### **Becoming In-Process/In-Process Becomings**

In extending the metaphor of the armature and sculpture above, I now begin to re/consider the static quality of the papier-mâché sculptural product, an entity that was once thought to have a distinct “ending” when the creator deemed such time had occurred in the artistic process. It was submitted to the instructor or exhibited in the annual visual arts show as a material manifestation of what was accomplished/completed by the student. Consequently, I now see the objects as engaged in a much longer becoming. Those sculptures that made it home with the student perhaps found a ledge on which to be posed and admired, leaving imprints on those bodies that traversed such spaces. Those sculptures that met their demise amidst rubbish, tossed in the industrial-sized trash cans in the art room, lived on in a less relational but still material manner. The paper eventually breaking down, sopping and sagging into a large trash heap, maybe eventually finding its way into the soil, feeding new trees from which new paper, new papier-mâché sculptures, would emerge. The completion of the sculptural product was not an end, but simply a middle from which another middle might swell.

We might, then, begin to understand our narrative inquiries in a similar way. My dissertation study was written, defended, printed, and bound, and now serves as a material manifestation of what I accomplished/completed in graduate school. Despite its polished and finished appearance, however, it does not stand as a static entity. Perhaps others find it through the database and read it, perhaps it provokes them, or perhaps it even leaves an imprint on them. It lives on. Even more tangibly, it certainly lives with/of me. Through an ontology of relationality and process, I continue to think about the lives of the participants, their/our stories, and I understand that my study never really ended but continues to amass and evolve, entangling us all indefinitely.

Moving between relationality, structure, and process, I (two years post-dissertation) find myself struck by post-structuralist and new materialist theories as inspiring this renewed conception. It is not that my thinking has changed entirely from my dissertation work, yet I find myself considering narrative inquiry through new languages and onto-epistemologies. In what follows, I ask how we might extend and entangle the three concepts of becoming in the midst, wide-awake, and in-between

into the entangled becoming in-process and in-process becomings I have found so insightful in my (ongoing) narrative inquiry.

To begin, being in the midst emerged as an essential concept as I navigated the relationality of my study. Acknowledging the ongoing lives of the participants and my brief yet potentially imprinting presence inevitably brought me to consider the unfolding and enfolding quality of the participants' narratives, as well as the ever-present ethical considerations of qualitative work. Similarly, Greene's (1995) use of wide-awakeness as a social and social justice minded practice of becoming conscious of our place in and of the world, is not separate from our place in the midst. The relational consideration of Self and Other ring clear within both of these concepts; however, I now believe that we never fully assume our place in the midst. Rather, as Greene (1995) argued, we should always strive toward this space, always becoming with our participants as we come to co-construct ongoing narratives. It is not a matter of being in the midst, rather a focus on becoming *of* the midst.

In my recent consideration of narrative methodology with such relational practices, it has been helpful to turn to Barad (2007). When I first encountered Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) discussion of being in the midst and Greene's (1995) phenomenological notion of wide-awakeness, it was through interaction that I began to understand how we come to be with our participants. Through re/examining *interaction* with Barad's notion of *intra-action*, the constructivist separation between bodies (Self *and* Other) as entities that are formed and then come together is disrupted through an entanglement of bodies (Self/Other) that emerge through their relationality. Barad pointed to "the epistemological inseparability of observer and observed" (p. 139), where boundaries between Self and Other become porous and indeterminate—where bodies do not simply interact, they *intra-act*. In other words, *intra-action* takes into consideration a dynamic relationality, an entanglement, in which both observer/observed are mutually co-constituted—they become together, they become *of*, not just *in*, the world (Barad, 2007).

Intricately entwined with such relationality I have also found the writings of Deleuze and Guattari (1987) influential, particularly the notion of the rhizome. The rhizome is defined as a decentralized root system with multiple entryways, points of rupture, and possibilities of connection, "having no beginning or end; ... always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*" (p. 25). Thus, the movements of the rhizome are multiple and indefinite. In considering the implications of

the rhizome for narrative inquiry, Loots, Coppens, and Sermijn (2013) explain that

a rhizome approach ... moves in a decentralizing way; the polyphonic voices emerge and expand in a continuous process of differentiating, connecting, and rupturing, and grow into divergent lines that energize the actualization of life and human subjectivity as an ongoing process of becoming. (p. 121)

Inquiring narratively with the rhizome in mind, then, assumes a processual ontology where stories are understood as fragmented, in perpetual states of becoming, representative of many and sometimes conflicting voices, and complex in their multiple layers and connections. Here, the narrative, like the rhizome, resists conclusion, and continues to rupture and create offshoots and move in that direction, and this one, and.... And I find myself re/considering the memo once again. Thinking through Deleuze and Guattari creates a space for snippets, glimpses, nebulous borders, and middles to be valued.

### **Narratively Living-Inquiring**

In this article I have presented my thoughts-in-process, in the middle or in-between, with the hope that a theoretical inquiry into narrative inquiry as an ontology of relationality and process, significantly *becoming*, might foster a deeper engagement with my ever-unfolding research as well as resonate with a community of narrative inquirers. To be sure, conceptualizing narrative work as in-process is not inherently novel. However, in this paper I have worked to problematize and disrupt the desire for neatly bound endings in narrative *and* in inquiry, allowing us to embrace the messiness and the value of incessantly critiquing our work and our practice as in-process. As I re/consider the notion of in-process critiques, I see the entirety of the creation and critique iteration as performative. It is not just the art/the narrative that is considered through critique, it is truly our becoming as creative inquirers. It is how we are making sense of our work and how Others see and come to understand both where our work stands and how it moves and affects them through intra-action. It is the relationality of the critique that is also valuable as it brings individuals together in shared dialogue with a collective furrowed brow. Performing through this paper as my in-process critique, I expose my own narrative sense-making and make transparent my process in

shifting from a more constructivist paradigm to one inspired by poststructuralism and new materialism. Shifting, becoming, incessantly.

Ever mindful of walking the line between being labeled the dreaded “navel-gazer” and looking outward to the questions and challenges omnipresent in conducting narrative inquiry, I am reminded once again of wide-awakeness. To become wide-awake, we must be mindful of our own consciousness as well as our interconnectedness to the world in which we live. My investigation into these states of becoming has afforded me a valuable opportunity to engage in an in-process critique of my work and provides a shifting and flexible framework through which other researchers might consider their narrative inquiries. Greene (1995) asserted that: “It is by writing that I often manage to name alternatives and to open myself to possibilities” (p. 107) and it was through writing the memo above and the article itself that I developed new understandings of my research. In writing about the lingering reverberations of my dissertation inquiry, I have become further engaged in my field texts, more reflexive about my research process, and more inquisitive about this methodology we call “narrative inquiry.” It is my hope that other researchers will also share their in-between struggles, inquiries, and practices in conducting narrative inquiry as we have much to learn from subjecting our work to the in-process critique.

### Postlude

*My daughter and I eat our meals at a nondescript hand-me-down wooden table in a small nook adjacent to our kitchen. Every morning and afternoon, I tug on the white cords and open the wooden blinds so we can observe the slice of world located between our house and our neighbours' house. We look for birds and flying insects which, when spied, invoke her little arm to frenetically zig and zag, mimicking the flight path of a trapped fly. Sometimes in the morning the sun is positioned so that it shines in her eyes, and I tug on the white cord again and let the blinds close a bit. The blinds which once resembled the thickness of a marker line become thick like rulers and our view of the world transforms into a repetitive pattern of outside, wooden blind, outside, wooden blind. Despite the blinds blocking large segments of our view, we can still make out the split-rail fence, the sharp hill that designates our property line, and the once half-dead cypress tree that is now miraculously thriving.*

*One morning, I was struck by this visual as I reflected on my role as a researcher. In narrative inquiry, we are always looking at the world*

*through wooden blinds. Even though there are times when the partially closed blinds conceal parts of the outside world, we are still able to get a sense of the relational scene unfolding between our house and our neighbours' house. Yes, there may be details missing—an unavoidable incompleteness—but the storied landscape we co-create with our participants is alive and richly hued. The problem occurs when we pull too hard on the cord so that we can no longer see enough of the outside world—the openings are just too small and the lived experiences of our participants become fragmented, blurred, abstracted to the point that such incompleteness becomes problematic.*

*By assuming the role of inquirers in the midst, we can remain wide-awake to the stories that we construct alongside our participants. We have the ability to open the blinds and expose readers to an emerging relational and processual landscape. The landscape is fluid, just like our narratives; and also like our narratives, it resists a resolute ending. What we come to know is ever in-between and beautifully incomplete in its becoming...*

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