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**Hegemony and counter-hegemony in the television performance
of racial differences in France**

Abstract

Between 1998 and 2006, French television shifted performance mode, from an approach emphasizing colour blindness to one explicitly and proactively emphasizing diversity. This shift is all the more surprising as it goes against the French republican tradition “of indifference to differences”. This paper proposes first of all to describe the stages of this shift by showing how conflict within the public sphere produced dynamics that were ultimately translated into reconfigured television program content. It then shows how hegemonic and counter-hegemonic conflicts concerning racial relationships and identities (both individual and national) are at play, including in the performance of nonwhite actorhood. The paper concludes with the hypothesis that the recent abundance of counter-stereotypes, far from abolishing (persistent) stereotypes, instead imagines a “post-racist” world, which is another form of colour blindness.

Keywords

Discrimination - race relations - minorities - public sphere - television – stereotypes - France

Contrary to public institutions, television is not supposed to represent the nation¹. As a cultural industry, television is a risky business driven by the tensions between the supposed profits associated with conservative programming and the supposed risks of innovation, between the potential benefits of innovation and the risks that conservatism will end in unprofitable boredom (Hesmondhalgh, 2002). Operating within an increasingly competitive market, television operators must anticipate the supposed desires of an imagined public by articulating what they think is the temporary conformism of the moment. At the same time, they do this within the context of contemporary society's 'second modernity', with its built-in uncertainties and complexities (Ellis, 2002).

Yet, even if television has no formal mandate to represent the nation, it is obvious that television is composed by the actors themselves in a public arena and on a public stage representing the nation. This, of course, was recognized by the American civil rights movement, with Blacks struggling to achieve a better and more representative media presence, as an extension of their broader fight for recognition in the political field (Fraser 1992, Gray, 2004). In this way, television is an arena reflecting the conflicting dynamics of the public sphere. Cultural movements and countermovements, hegemonic and counterhegemonic movements extend their fight into the media realm, struggling over details of programming, of casting (whether for a political, literary or cultural debate or for a fictionalized series), of documentary narrative or even over the topic of a game show (Macé, 2006a). At the same time, television is a performance, a stage, because it is not the representation of an already present reality, but the performance of a point of view, the staging of an interpretative framing, the proposal of a more or less important legitimization or destabilization of what is awaited (Dayan, 2006). Finally, television is also a cultural resource. That is, television is not merely "popular culture" with weak legitimacy or a mystifying "mass culture", but an offer of "media-cultures", more or less common to all,

which take part in a contemporary anthropology of the individual and of identities (Maigret, Macé, 2005).

From this point of view, it is striking to observe how, between 1998 and 2006, French television was constructed as an arena, a stage that ought to reflect the nation: from operating on the basis of color blindness French television shifted to proactively represent diversity. To understand this shift, it is necessary to understand how conflicts within the French public sphere resulted in the transformation of the “struggle for visibility” into a “public issue”, in particular at the time of the riots of November 2005, which took place primarily in the impoverished, deprived, racialized urban areas around Paris and other large cities. We will then show that the increasing presence of counter-stereotypes does not necessarily lead to a reduction of stereotypes in general nor to the development of reflexive anti-stereotypes nor even to an exit from assimilationist assumptions of colour blindness.

From indifference to voluntarism

Until 1998, French television was the reflection of the French republican model: in the name of the principle of equality between individuals, it is advisable to be “indifferent to differences”, i.e. not to take into account the differences between individuals and groups, in order not to threaten the nation’s unity by opposing “communities” based on race, ethnic group, gender, religion, etc. However, the perverse effect of this “indifference to differences” is well known; it is that of indifference to discriminations since it is in the name of formal equality of rights that one avoids taking into account actually-existing discriminations (Wieviorka, 1996).

It is precisely this under-representation and the systematically stereotyped treatment of non-white minorities that the Collectif Égalité (Group for Equality) – an association of black artists and intellectuals under the writer Calixte Belaya – rejected. By means of public demonstrations intended to create an event (for example the disturbance of the International Cannes film festival), the Group for Equality explicitly denounced the damage caused by “White” French television, arguing that French television was blind to the transformations of an increasingly diverse French society. In short, they argued that French television failed to reflect France in all its diversity, notably ignoring French citizens who have family links with immigration from Africa, the West Indies and elsewhere. Far from reflecting the reality of French society, French television consistently, if not deliberately, masked the everyday reality of a multiracial society e.g., as epitomized by the “Black Blanc Beur”ⁱⁱ team that won the football world cup in 1998.

Normally, this “struggle for visibility” (Klotman, Cutler, 1999) should not have been understood as a “public issue” (Hilgartner, Bosk, 1988) given French republican rhetoric that assimilated such struggles for visibility with a so-called “ethnic sectarianism” threatening the nation’s unity. But the president of the CSA (Conseil Supérieur de l’Audiovisuel – the Higher Audiovisual Council responsible for legally regulating television), was, at the time, personally concerned about these issues and took the initiative to carry out a quantitative and qualitative study in 1999 intended to evaluate the reality of discriminations. This study, published in 2000 and entitled *Presence and representation of visible minorities on French television*, showed that the Group for Equality’s critiques were justified. When Blacks are present, it is in sports or music programs rather than in other programs or in fictionalized series; when they are present in fictions, it is in American fictions rather than in the French ones where, in any case, they never play the main character. As for the Arabs – that is, people from ex- French

colonies in North Africa or post-colonial descendants of north African migrants - they are virtually unrepresented in almost all programs even though they represent the majority of the non-white population in France (CSA, 2000). From this point of view, the results of these studies confirm those carried out in the United States, in Canada and in Great Britain, as well as other studies carried out later in France: over-representation of Blacks in comparison with the other people of colour; over-representation of people of colour in stereotyped television programs (sports, music) and under-representation in advertisements, fictional series and everyday programs (e.g., day-time talk shows); and persistence of negative stereotypes in news programs, in particular related to violence and criminality (Hunt, 2005; Macé, 2007).

In spite of these results, this study did not have immediate effects on the practices of television professionals. First of all because the term “visible minority” employed by the study is ambiguous. On the one hand, it recognizes an asymmetry of the relations between a “majority” and a “minority”. But on the other hand it occults what it talks about – race relations - by using the euphemism “visible”. To put it differently, the expression “visible minority” resulted in making even more visible the fact that these minorities are deviant compared with the white standard, while leaving invisible the processes of discriminations themselves. This way of taking into account the race relationship issue while euphemizing it, thus resulted in reproducing hegemonic representations according to which people of colour are less prone to discrimination than marked (Brekhus, 1998) by their strangeness compared with “normal” Frenchness. The concept of “visible minority” was thus understood as the equivalent of “first and second (and third) generation immigrants”, literally, “resulting from immigration” (“*issus de l'immigration*”). The same notion was likewise translated into the absurd formulation “people with visible minority origins”, literally “people resulting from visible minorities” (“*issus des minorités visibles*”).

The other reason explaining the small effect of this study is the very strong resistance which it met from authorities in charge of integration policies. Given the reluctance of the French political and intellectual worlds to confront discrimination and minorities' issues, the CSA thus revised, in 2004, the aim of the study, while adopting the traditional French egalitarian positions defended by the Haut Conseil à l'intégration (Higher Integration Council). The latter specified that if it is certainly important to regret racial discrimination and to encourage more "diversity", the principle of indifference to differences, the founding principle of equality as understood in French Republican thought, must be respected concerning television programs. In this way, contrary to the study carried out in 2000, it was considered advisable, "not to name, not to quantify" (Macé, 2006b)ⁱⁱⁱ. Like the shift from a vocabulary emphasizing "visible minorities" to one emphasizing "diversity", this official return to the orthodoxy of abstract egalitarianism is a euphemism masking structural inequalities. Indeed, nowadays in France one observes a vulgarizing of the absurd expression "people resulting from diversity" ("*issus de la diversité*") to refer to the non-white population, which means that the link with the original expression "resulting from immigration" remains an important, even typical, way of referring to people of colour in France (Lapeyronnie, 1993).

However, the riots of November 2005 in many of the racialized, impoverished French urban areas (following the deaths of two non-white teenagers who were chased by the police, although they had committed no infraction), tended to legitimate the shift away from the traditional republican model of 'indifference to difference' towards a policy that emphasized explicitly (and positively) highlighting diversity. Admittedly, throughout the period of the riots, the interpretative script of the government, and in particular of the (then Home Secretary now French President) Nicolas Sarkozy, consisted of denouncing these riots not as a revolt against police harassment and discrimination, but as a violent and illegitimate expression of

dangerous classes made up of non-white delinquents refusing to integrate into French society. (Of course, this script suggested that the police were innocent of responsibility while simultaneously criminalizing the victims, further angering the mostly youthful rioters). Yet, then-President Jacques Chirac intervened solemnly on television at the end of the riots to give a very different point of view^{iv}. He explained the intensity of this public ‘disorder’ not by blaming minorities for failing to integrate, but rather by suggesting there was a crisis in the French model of integration. According to Chirac, and as was suggested earlier, the egalitarian principle of indifference to differences has the perverse effect of leading to indifference to discrimination, thus corrupting the principle of republican egalitarianism from within. President Chirac was thus the first to officially speak of minorities and diversity not only as a liberal question of (non)recognition of differences, but rather as a social and political issue related to discrimination. This was the rationale behind a vast programme designed to combat discrimination in all fields, including that of television programs. The performative dimension of television as stage(ing) the national identity is finally officially recognized, in article 47 of the law of “equal opportunity” of March 31, 2006. This law stipulates that “the Higher Audiovisual Council contributes to action in favour of social cohesion and the fight against discriminations in the field of audiovisual communication. It should make sure, in particular, that programming reflects the diversity of French society”. Eight years after the action of the Group for Equality, the discrimination issue in French television programs was finally officially registered, part of the mandate of French institutions and French television.

Effects and stakes of the new approach to ‘diversity’

Even before the promulgation of the law, this new approach concerning the greater “visibility” of the non-white population in France had observable effects on television. In

2004, and for the first time in the history of French television, the evening news of the public channel France 3 was presented by a Black journalist, Audrey Pulvar, and in 2006 the evening news of the private channel TF1 was also presented by a Black journalist, Harry Roselmack, for the first time (but only as a joker during the summer). But these changes were also visible in all the other programs, in particular in reality-show programs, games and even French fictional series, whereas it was hitherto almost exclusively the preserve of American television series.

However, as one can imagine, the issue of a stronger, more representative presence of people of colour in television programs does not entirely tackle the issue of the symbolic modes of television performance. The question which is raised here is that of the categories of the imaginary, or, more precisely, that of the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic categories which configure collective imaginaries, and *a fortiori* national ones. In particular, the concept of the stereotype may be a good indicator of the extent and ways in which performance modes for people of colour take part or not in the symbolic legitimization of discriminations. If stereotypes are defined as the naturalized expression of an asymmetry in power relationships - that of naming, showing, reducing, assigning (Memmi, 1984; Said, 1980) - the question is not so much their existence or their persistence but the ways in which they are reconfigured. This suggests that the traditional concept of the stereotype, whether positive or negative, must be supplemented by those of counter-stereotype and anti-stereotype to account for contemporary displacements of what is made visible and of what remains invisible. Without losing sight of the intrinsic polysemia of television accounts and the diversity of their interpretations by complex individuals, whose identities are never monolithic but instead fragmentary and unstable, one can thus distinguish several performance modes for people of colour: positive or negative stereotypes, counter-stereotypes and anti-stereotypes. Beginning with these

categories, I consider the ways in which French television portrays people of colour and analyze their relation to the imaginary of the French national identity in a post-colonial period.

Persistent stereotypes...

Already numerous before the issue of discrimination was raised, racial stereotypes remain persistent today. The main function of racial stereotypes is to make visible people of colour's deviance from 'whiteness', while processes of discrimination against people of colour are made invisible. At the same time, racial stereotypes unproblematically *assume* standards of 'whiteness' and 'nonwhiteness'. Certain stereotypes are positive, insofar as they recall the subordinate but pleasant nature of the relationship between 'non-whites' and 'whites', most of them from colonialist and orientalist imaginery. A great number of examples can be found in entertainment, sports, tourist and humanitarian campaigns, the most famous is the black character of a chocolate brand advertisement who is a colonial skirmisher ("Banania"). Other stereotypes are negative: they recall duplicity, cheating, jealousy, savagery, the uncivilized non-white. In addition to the pejorative connotations related to Islam in general (Macé, Guénif-Souilamas, 2006; Deltombe, 2005), undoubtedly the most persistent negative stereotype is that which assigns the quality of 'ethnic' to any person of colour, thus legitimating hegemonic representation according to which any person of colour is marked by an ethnic singularity while the White are not "ethnic" but "normal" and "universal" (Dyer, 1997). Recurring illustrations of this can be found in the ordinary treatment of urban violence and the recent riots: it only concerns "ethnic gangs", since they are "obviously" Black and Arab - as everyone may observe on television (Macé, Peralva, 2002).

New counter-stereotypes

But what is more striking in the recent transformations of French television performance, is the presence and the multiplication of *counter-stereotypes*. At the narrative's centre, the counter-stereotype takes the opposite position to that of the stereotype by proposing a 'reverse' performance: if the stereotype depicts people of colour who are not well integrated culturally, who are socially excluded or play subordinate parts, the counter-stereotype shows middle class people of colour or even people of colour with prestigious social status, playing main characters. This is often seen in programmes from the United States (cf. *The Cosby show*, Hunt, 2005), but it is a more recent phenomena in France. The counter-stereotype has a specific virtue: it widens the repertory of legitimate performance modes available to people of colour. To an extent this represents a sort of "color blind" universalistic egalitarianism universe within television, as well as offering a positive, non-stigmatized, role model for the public concerned. However, the counter-stereotype has its own limits, well catalogued by American television studies and the concept of "tokenism" (Gray, 2004; Hunt, 2005). First, it proceeds by denying ethnicity. Indeed, the necessary condition for the multiplication of counter-stereotypes is the complete assimilation of those who incarnate it, prohibiting them from any reference to the specificity of their ethnicity at the risk of compromising the "fiction" of their assimilation to whiteness and thus their capacity to be presented in the form of a counter-stereotype. The counter-stereotype then proceeds by a denial of all discrimination. The counter-stereotype acts as if the stereotypes did not exist, as if discrimination did not exist any more, staging a "post-racist" world which can be used, on the one hand, to undermine the legitimacy of the discrimination issue. Discrimination at the level of representation is abolished, but this only serves to mask actual practices of discrimination, which remain invisible. On the other hand, counter-stereotypical actors may sometimes

reproduce discrimination -- as when a Black television news presenter blandly proposes a report about “ethnic gangs”.

French television offers at least two examples of such counter-stereotypes. The first is the character of the lawyer Malik Nassri, played by the actor Sofiane Belmouden in France 3's daily series, *Plus belle la vie* (*A more beautiful life*). Although obviously Arab by his name and his aspect, the character does not make any reference to his ethnicity and never makes any cultural reference to his socialization and his family history and family life, except in a negative way and in order to better mark his rupture vis-à-vis this culture. The text which introduces the character on the official Web site of the series is a concentration of typical French counter-stereotypes: “Very quickly, Malik understood that he must work harder than the others in order to leave his milieu. Born in the northern districts of Marseilles, he swore to climb the social ladder. Through determination and seriousness, he succeeded in leaving the estates to finish his law studies. Malik believes in the values of work and in the Republic. A hard worker, he does not hide his ambition; sometimes even neglecting his family, including his young sister, Samia, who finds comfort and protection in her older brother after having fled a marriage arranged by her parents”. The second example of a ‘counter-stereotype’ similarly denies the specificity of the experience of people of colour in France. In the television movie produced and aired in October 2007 by France 2 called *Notable donc coupable* (*Prominent thus guilty*), the actress Rachida Brakni plays a main character, that of a journalist investigating the mayor of a large city, suspected of involvement in a criminal network. However, this characteristic of casting is not taken into account by the scenario since the journalist has a typically French name, Claire Laris, thus prohibiting consideration of any dimension of ethnicity other than that of a white Frenchwoman. In other words, the people incarnating the counter-stereotypes *could be White*, with their physical appearance reduced to the merely incidental. Yet, they can only act as if they were so by specifically ignoring

discrimination and the everyday experiences of people of colour. At the same time, the white standard of 'normality' within which they are operating goes unquestioned, not least since it is this lack of questioning, their perfect incarnation of white standards of normalcy, which enables them to function as counter-stereotypes (Jhally, Lewis, 2005). Here, more than ever, it is the hegemonic point of view described by Fanon which commands the performance: "Black skin, white masks" (Pennon, 1994). From this standpoint, these recent counter-stereotypes may be considered as new stereotypes. Following Stuart Hall, we can see them as "a kind of difference that doesn't make a difference of any kind" (Hall, 1996a, p. 467). Thus, the multiplication of counter-stereotypes has relatively low symbolic cost, since, far from troubling the normative assumptions of white Frenchness, they contribute to its legitimization.

From this point of view, it is striking to note the hegemonic synchronization between the multiplication of counter-stereotypes in the television performance modes of people of colour, and the political strategy of President Sarkozy with respect to the 'casting' of government positions. Sarkozy has appointed a record number of visible minorities as ministers, which is totally atypical of France, where both local assemblies and the French parliament are almost exclusively peopled by white men. The case of Rachida Dati, Minister for justice and post-colonial descendant of north African migrants, is emblematic. As the example of the perfectly integrated/assimilated ethnic minority, Dati makes no reference to her ethnicity or ethnicity more generally. Moreover, she is expected to demonstrate perfect support for government policy, including its high-profile policies to limit to Arab and African immigration. Thus, in a barely-coded reference to the undesirability of immigrants of colour and the relatively desirability of white immigrants, Sarkozy's government insists on curbing the 'free immigration' (of immigrants of colour) while encouraging the state's 'chosen immigration' (of supposedly easily assimilated white immigrants, preferably from Eastern Europe). At the

same time, DNA tests for immigrants have been introduced, supposedly to ensure that immigrants – implicitly dishonest and possibly criminal - are not lying about family relationships in order to secure residency in France. The French newspaper *Libération* writes: “The friends and relatives of the minister explain her silence on DNA tests^v by stating that she chooses to avoid intervening on subjects precisely where people want to hear her ‘because she is a descendent of immigrants’. She refuses to be locked-up ‘in the box where people want to put her’”. In this way, *Libération* echoes the hegemonic position that counter-stereotypes reinforce, since it is understood that Dati can only successfully play her counter-stereotypical role by denying her ethnicity and by studiously refusing to comment on political decisions about immigration and race relations.

Thus, far from marking a rupture with the preceding indifference to differences, the multiplication of counter-stereotypes in the French media (and in the French government) would tend, on the contrary, to legitimate the shift from one “color blind” national identity model to another. Before, people of colour were marginalized in the name of indifference to discrimination, now, the necessary condition for their new visibility is the denial of people of colour as a social fact in France. Rather than highlighting ongoing discrimination, the new visibility of people of colour is used to refute the existence of such discriminations – in a world of Maliks and Datis, discrimination (it is implied) no longer exists.

More anti-stereotypes ?

Anti-stereotypes are another representational mode for people of colour on television and in other fields. Anti-stereotypes are not new, but which appear to be, in a rather counter-hegemonic dynamic, more present. The anti-stereotype questions and troubles stereotypes as part of a broader reflexivity about post-colonial ethnicities. On the one hand, anti-stereotypes

destabilize the essentialist, culturalist and hegemonic racialization of minorities. On the other hand, it also destabilizes the white “normality” of the majority, whether with humor or more direct interpellation or through the complexity of the fictional narrations (Hall, 1996b). The most famous French incarnation of the anti-stereotype is undoubtedly the humorist Jamel Debbouze. Debbouze success is based on his ability to mockingly stage the ordinary racial stereotypes of contemporary French culture, including stereotypes of White people. However, the limitations of the buffoon role are well known: the jester transgresses taboos, but only to amuse the powerful. Other anti-stereotypes can be found in the news, when the people concerned by stereotypes dispute them by revealing them. Thus the footballer Lilian Thuram declared in the sports newspaper *L'Equipe* that he is not Black, at least, not in the sense typically assigned to him. Instead, he argued that he only defines himself as such when specifically reflecting upon the historical and cultural web of his West-Indian origins^{vi}. A similar point of view was put forward in some interviews with young rioters during the November 2005 disturbances, in which the youth clearly explain the political orientation of their revolt against police harassment and the "law and order" public policies of the government^{vii}. These youth specifically argue against political policies that depend upon, and reinforce, criminalized, racialized images of those living in France's suburban housing projects. Some anti-stereotypes have also been observed recently in French fiction, as in the new police series *Les Bleus, premiers pas dans la police* (*First steps in the police force*) on the private channel M6, which plays with the codes of racial stereotypes through a mixture of gravity and humor. The case of France 3's series *Plus belle la vie* (*A more beautiful life*) is more ambiguous, but it is undoubtedly the only French fiction to have integrated as a main character, a girl wearing an Islamic veil, a taboo object in France since its prohibition in schools in 2004 in the name of a (dubious) national ‘secularity’ (Guénif-Souilamas, Macé 2006)^{viii}. France, however, remains far behind the anti-stereotyped fictions proposed by

Anglo-Saxon television programs such as the British series *Goodness Gracious Me* (Gillespie, 2003), or, more recently, the Canadian series called *The little mosque in the prairie*, which playfully destabilizes racial, ethnic and religious boundaries in a postcolonial world, with queries like: “is it possible not to wear the Islamic veil during aqua-gym lessons if the teacher is gay?”.

Conclusions

Developing anti-stereotypes in French television programs is about creating the space for a variety of television performance modes for people of colour. This is not a question merely of numbers. Rather, it is about creating a variety of representations, reflecting the variety of experiences of French citizens and residents of colour. A post-hegemonic television would mean that such varieties of programmes and of representations would become a normal, not exceptional, fact of French television. In practice, this means achieving an *ongoing tension* between performances that portray human beings, with all their hopes, fears, dilemmas, flaws and strengths, as such and those that emphasize human beings as profoundly embedded in historically specific moments and relationships, including the historically specific and evolving realities of racism and discrimination. Yet, ultimately, post-hegemonic television means more than this – it means developing the kind of critical reflexivity offered by Lilliam Thuram when he states, ‘I am not black’: namely, a willingness to destabilize the taken-for-granted categories of ‘whiteness’ and ‘nonwhiteness’.

It requires the mobilization of large segments of the French population, not just around representation in the media but attacking stereotypes and French Republic ideals, with their built-in assumptions of normative whiteness, across all aspects of society. The imaginary national identity can no longer be taken for granted, but must become the object of self-conscious reflexivity and debate, in television as in the rest of French society. Yet, as this

paper has shown, this will not be easy. If the cultural industry of television remains permeable to the dynamics of the public sphere, and therefore ultimately subject to progressive reform, on the other hand, hegemonic fronts are often reconfigured, even in performance modes that aspire to be counter-hegemonic.

Notes

ⁱ I want to thank Elaine Coburn, assistant professor in sociology at the American University in Paris, for helpful comments and advices.

ⁱⁱ Popular expression associating the English term Black to indicate the presence of Black people, the French term White ('Blanc') to indicate the presence of White people, and the slang term Beur to indicate the descendants of migrants of North Africa (Beur = Re-beu = Arab). This expression refers to the French flag's "Blue White Red" colours and makes the post-colonial transformations of the French society visible in a positive way. At the time of the riots of 2005, this positive connotation was replaced by a negative connotation, the French team then being referred to publicly by some as "Black Black Black", thus making reference to the color of the majority of the players of the French team as well as to that of the rioters, underlining in this way their strangeness to the supposed French "normally" white society.

ⁱⁱⁱ This point of view was recently reaffirmed on November 15, 2007 by the Constitutional Council which prohibits any statistical measurement of indirect racial discriminations by means of racial indicators, in the name of the abstract egalitarian principle of indifference to differences.

^{iv} Official television speech on November 14, 2005.

^v A new aspect of immigration law seeks to generalize DNA tests in order to fight against 'suspicious' family regrouping of (non white) migrants. Although all migrants are potentially subject to this law, it is clearly aimed at migrants from the Third World.

^{vi} *L'Equipe*, June 29, 2006.

^{vii} Evening TV news, France 2, November 6, 2005.

^{viii} However, this transgression of the taboo is limited: the girl is not French but Algerian and she does not define herself as a modern neo-Moslem woman but as a traditional Moslem woman. If she appears as a sympathetic, sensitive person, and if the scenario allows her the possibility of defending the authenticity of her faith even while falling in love with a young non-Moslem man, the end is dramatic. She is raped, refuses to lodge a complaint because of a sense of shame and lets herself be convinced by her only confidant – a rebellious young black man – to take justice into her own hands. She then kills an innocent police officer before committing suicide the day before her originally planned return to Algeria.

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