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The Ruin as Memorial—The Memorial as Ruin

Silke Arnold-de Simone

I.

In his book In Ruins Christopher Woodward asks the provocative question if Hitler's admiration for ruins and the infamous notion of 'ruin value', favoured by Nazi architect Albert Speer, should somehow make readers suspicious of ruins' appeal and alert them to their potentially morally compromised aesthetic. But he reassures his readers:

To Hitler the Colosseum was not a ruin but a monument, a bottle that was half-full rather than half-empty He was attracted to the endurance of the masonry and the physical survival of an emperor's ambitions; to the lover of the ruinous, by contrast, the attraction is in the sight of transience and vulnerability. Poets and painters like ruins, and dictators like monuments. (Woodward 2002: 30).

In this juxtaposition between monument and memorial, Woodward seems to suggest that being compelled by something that signifies transience and vulnerability, rather than grandeur and the sublime, is somehow benign and therefore ethically superior. Is he saying that if the ruin gives rise to melancholy or even mourning, if it engages the imagination rather than the temptation to bask in the faded glory of ancient sites of power, it can be a force for good?

The ruin as a memorial, as a way to lament rather than celebrate the past, has a long tradition, although we ought to be careful to distinguish the different kinds of losses that are mourned in the meditation of ruins. In classical funerary iconography the broken column signifies life being cut short by death. During the baroque, the ruin stands as a memento mori, a reminder of the vanity of all earthly things. Writing during the Thirty Years' War (1618–48), the German poet Andreas Gryphius painted the following scenario in his poem 'All is transient' (Es ist alles eitel) (1643):

Wherever you look, you see nothing but transience on earth.

What this man builds today, that man tears down tomorrow:
 Where cities now stand, there will be a meadow
 On which a shepherd's child will play with the herds of animals.
 (Gryphius cite in Ryan 2012: 66)

Gryphius's melancholic anticipation of towns not only lying in ruin but having left no trace whatsoever while nature is taking over again, are indicative of his experience of the devastation of war. It also offers if not a pre-modern then certainly pre-industrial worldview that speaks of the comfort provided by human habitation as well as the desolation that humans feel when exposed to the cruel forces of nature. With the onset of industrialization, Gryphius's meadows turn into William Blake's 'pleasant pastures', which are contrasted with the nightmare of the 'dark satanic mills' in his poem 'And did those feet in ancient time' (1808) (Blake 2008: 95). In this constant battle between nature and culture there is something deeply reassuring to the modern eye in the seemingly indestructible force of nature. To Shelley the flowers blossoming in the ruins of the Baths of Caracalla in Rome spoke of hope for a future free from absolutist tyranny and its authoritarian monumentality, which was crumbling away.

The ruin can be compared to a lenticular picture that can only be fully appreciated by an unstable perception that flips between two different images, impossible to hold both in balance or see them simultaneously: ruins are evidence of nature asserting itself, crushing civilizations and triumphing over humankind's achievements, or they can be seen to redeem nature as the creative force of life prevailing over the destructive power wielded by human tyranny. The ruin is both a mark of human civilization asserting its enduring presence over nature, as it is the other way around. As such, ruins hold both promise and threat, they speak of death, disaster and destruction as much as of endurance and rebirth, especially as nature, that is, new life, takes over the decaying remains. Either way ruins blend culture (architecture) and nature (plants growing in and on the ruin) into a dynamic dialogue and suggest a possible reconciliation between the two opposing forces of material and form, merging creative and destructive powers (Simmel 1965: 265).

The ruin encapsulates an intriguing ambiguity in our relationship not only with nature and culture but also with time. In the ruin, the past has not endured and yet it has not been eradicated either, or, to refer to Judith Butler, 'it continues as an animating absence in the presence' (2003: 468). It has left a trace, a mark, which is why ruins are often seen as haunted and uncanny: like ghosts they are unfinished business, in one way or another. They are the unfamiliar familiar that cannot be repressed; they are something disquieting that refuses to die—the ruin and the undead have much in common.

In the ruin, time is made visible through space: the past invading the present and the future, always taking us out of the now, casting us backwards or forwards in time, as a catastrophe that has already happened or will happen: the past as ruinous present, the present as anticipated cataclysmic future.

Ruins have a utopian, apocalyptic and nostalgic potential, they are heterotopias of time and space. In some instances ruins offer what at first glance could be considered conflicting forms of engagement with the past: they provide the frisson of an austere and oppressive past that nevertheless also triggers a certain nostalgia, a combination often found in former communist countries in Eastern Europe. Budapest's so-called 'ruin pubs' are only one of the many examples of 'Ostalgie' (nostalgia for the everyday life of the old communist East): they are set up in tenement houses and factory buildings marked for destruction with rejected furniture of old community centres, cinemas and grandmothers' flats. In Szimpla Kert (Simple Garden) visitors can have a beer in an old Trabant car; in Instant they can stroll around in the labyrinth of the tenement house; and in Kertem (My Garden) they can feel the atmosphere of a socialist beer-garden of the 1980s.

Ruins allow for and seem to generate competing temporalities: for Slavoj Žižek (2011: 196) they epitomize the 'end times' in which we supposedly live; for others they allow us to see the historical dimension in both culture and nature; and some claim that they suspend time altogether,

allowing us to step out of history and question the neat linear temporality of historical progress. In any case, ruins—both in their concrete materiality and as metaphor or trope – ‘invite “reflective excavation” that can lead to historical revision and the creation of alternative futures’ (Lazzara and Unruh 2009: 3).

Ruins can be the remains of obsolete buildings, unneeded and unwanted sites, the result of economic decay and dislocation, wasting away, with no one able to afford to tear them down, rebuild them; or indeed, in the case of unfinished construction and abandoned futures, complete them. But they can also be the visual reminders of an extraordinary act of violence and destruction. In the case of Pompeii, Vesuvius’s eruption in 79 AD preserved a mundane environment that would have otherwise never endured. Here the fascination lies not in the crumbling structure of a once mighty and impressive building but in the arrested spectacle of an awe-inspiring event of monumental destruction. Vesuvius’s eruption was a natural disaster and the fact that the lava preserved the remains was simply accidental. A conscious effort to preserve ruins is often made when destruction is not so much the result of ‘organic’ decay over time or the devastating power of a natural catastrophe but when the violence is inflicted by man. Then the poignant remains are increasingly seen as useful warning to descendants, as a way to ensure that such an event will never happen again. This is certainly not a new sentiment: artists in the past have written about or painted the fall of mighty empires and their cities such as Troy, Athens, Rome or Carthage, which all served as dark forebodings of what may happen to London and the British Empire. Some even went so far as to picture such a future for London, from Joseph Gandy’s Vision of the Bank of England in Ruins (1798) and Gustave Doré’s The New Zealander (1872) to post-apocalyptic films such as Danny Boyle’s *28 Weeks Later* (2007). Edmund Burke, in his A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful (1757), concedes the attraction of a London in ruins for tourists, ‘many who would have been content never to have seen London in its glory.’ (Burke 2004: 94). Burke’s observation is a stark reminder of the early days of dark tourism and of the long tradition of the mighty city in ruins embodying the threat of a society's collapse. Seen in this

light, it may not only be Manhattan's value in real estate that spoke against the preservation of the remains of the Twin Towers as memorial and that resulted in the eventual construction of the 'Freedom Tower'. And while many countries preserved memorial ruins in the aftermaths of wars, such as the only recently rebuilt Frauenkirche in Dresden, Germany, the Ruin of Hiroshima Prefectural Industrial Promotion Hall, now the Hiroshima Peace Memorial in Japan, and the village of Oradour-sur-Glane near to Limoges, in France, other communities, ravaged by war, resisted this form of memorialization. When Winston Churchill wanted to preserve the ruinous Ypres as a memorial to the British and Empire soldiers of the First World War, the population insisted on rebuilding their town, as did the population of Warsaw after World War II when they opted for an exact reconstruction of their old historic centre.

In recent years, natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods or tsunamis are increasingly memorialized by preserving some of the actual aftermath. On 12 May 2008, the Chinese town of Beichuan was devastated by an earthquake measuring 7.9 magnitude on the Richter scale. Faced with the task of providing shelter for the survivors, it was decided that the population would be moved to a new town 12 miles away from the old site. Beichuan itself was never rebuilt, or even excavated, but remained in its current state as a memorial. Today, Beichuan appears frozen; the moment of destruction is eerily suspended in time. In this giant open-air memorial tourists can witness first-hand the ruined buildings, which appear much as they did only a few minutes after the earthquake struck, the city's 'crumbled and crumbling remains propped up and preserved to serve as a reminder of the tragic intersection of tectonics and society' (Elliott 2013). One of the many tourists visiting the site reflects: 'Tragic as these sites are, they tend to be well done monuments for a mixture of somber reflection and illuminating education. What better way to learn about earthquakes than to go see one frozen in time?' (Elliott 2013). While Simmel argues that true ruins are the product of the natural effect of time over a long period and that detachment is not

possible from recent ruins, which are the product of violence and catastrophe (Simmel 1965: 265), this sentiment seems to suggest otherwise.

Just as ruins in the past exerted a major draw for tourists on the Grand Tour, today they are on the trail of what in 1996 Lennon and Foley termed 'dark tourism' to describe people travelling to sites of disasters, atrocities and trauma (Lennon and Foley 2000). So just like Shelley, Wordsworth¹ [note]² and the romantic poets and painters referred to by Woodward, it seems that we are irresistibly drawn to ruins. But in contrast to Shelley's perception of the ruins of Caracalla, these modern ruins do not hold the promise of transformation. It is no longer the triumphs of either nature or culture nor the equilibrium between the two that is celebrated in ruins: ruins authenticate catastrophes and the trauma they induce, they are trauma made visible. But trauma has gained such a wide meaning that it can equally encompass the mortification felt after the loss of an empire and the humiliation of fallen grandeur as well as the brutal dehumanization of society and the violent persecution of minorities. In the following, two highly contested if very different examples of memorial ruins exemplify the wide spectrum of the commemorative use of 'authentic' as well as 'fake' ruins.

II.

In Budapest's controversial Memorial to the Victims of the German Occupation (**Image 1**) by the sculptor Imre Párkányi Raab the iconography of the ruin is consciously reproduced for commemorative purposes. While the ruins here are not authentic (in contrast to Budapest's ruin pubs) and, even worse, are part of a falsifying re-writing of history by Hungary's far-right government, they have triggered a genuine emotionally charged public debate and protest movement, which openly addresses the problematic relationship of the Hungarian people with their past and Hungary's role in World War II. The memorial was erected under cover of darkness in July 2014: shortly after midnight some 100 police officers closed off the Szabadság Square as workmen installed what looked like the remains of a temple with broken columns and a tympanum holding a bronze eagle, representing Nazi

Germany. On one of the eagle's talons is tagged 1944, the year of the German invasion. Below the eagle a bronze statue of the Archangel Gabriel has been erected, representing 'innocent Hungary'. Critics accuse the government of attempting to absolve the Horthy regime, which had been allied to Nazi Germany, of its responsibility for the murder of nearly one million Hungarians, including two-thirds of its Jewish population and entire communities of Roma who were sent to death camps. They also point to the more than willing collaboration of many Hungarians in the genocide. Riot police intervened as protesters tore down the protective fence around the memorial and pelted the statues with eggs. Hundreds have left trinkets, candles and other objects to express their opposition to the memorial. There are daily vigils and protests in front of the monument and it is reportedly now the most protected object in Hungary (Nolan 2014).

Critics have also pointed out the faulty symbolism (Ungváry 2014) in the memorial, for example the use of the imperial eagle to depict Nazi Germany, an eagle that was the insignia not only of the German Empire but also the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. The question is if this symbolism does not in fact reveal the displacement of mourning in which the current Hungarian Government wants to unite the nation – a nation that excludes the Roma whose persecution and systematic extermination is not mentioned on the memorial. What observers are invited to deplore in national unity are not the victims of genocide committed in the name of and for the nation, but the supposed victimization of the nation itself, an independent Hungary, which resulted in fact from a crushing defeat in World War I, along with the collapse of the dual monarchy: the peace settlement known as the Treaty of Trianon came with the loss of 71 per cent of its territory and 66 per cent of its population. By 1920, Admiral Miklós Horthy had re-established Hungary as a kingdom with the aim to reunite this 'Greater Hungary'. The hope that Hungary may regain its lost territory was a major incentive for Horthy's government to ally itself with the Axis nations in 1940. This publically unacknowledged and repressed history shines through the story told by the symbols, a story of the Hungarian defeat and loss of territory associated with the imperial eagle and with the grand ruins pointing to the end of the once

mighty Austro-Hungarian Empire. In addition to the Hungarian inscription ‘Az áldozatok emlékére’ (‘In memory of the victims’), a separate plaque shows the English, Hebrew, German and Russian translations. However, the Hebrew inscription of the monument mistranslates the word ‘victims’ as ‘sacrifice’, choosing a grammatical structure that indicates that the subject is inanimate. While this is most certainly a slippage, it uncannily suggests that the allegorically personified concept of the nation is seen as the only true victim. It seems the memorial amalgamates the two World Wars and their aftermaths, and figures Hungary as being occupied, wronged and victimized by various empires (the Habsburg Empire, Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union). Equally, it invites one to mourn not the atrocities committed in the pursuit of a once again powerful nation and the suffering it caused, but the loss of power, territory and the nation’s sovereignty, all of which are major concerns of the current government of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán (Palonen 2008: 225). However, in this case, the political instrumentalization of the fake ruin has triggered a genuine protest movement and thereby inadvertently generated critical reflection in response to the public incitement to mourn ‘lost grandeur’.

III.

There are other examples in which ruins do not so much facilitate displacement, as in Hungary, but rather enable a reconfiguration of our relationship with the past that allows for the political work of mourning to take place. In March 2014 Argentina commemorated the tenth anniversary of reclaiming ESMA (Escuela Superior de Mecánica de la Armada) for civil society.^[note]² ESMA is the former Naval Academy of Mechanics, an educational facility of the Argentine Navy that has acquired notoriety as the worst of 600 clandestine detention and torture centres operating during the military junta’s so-called ‘Dirty War’ from 1976 to 1983 in which about 30,000 leftist political activists and militants were abducted, killed and ‘disappeared’. (cp. Sosa 2014: 85).

The decision of how to treat the ‘heart of darkness’ at the centre of the ESMA complex, the Casino de Oficiales (**Image 2**), in which the abducted

were imprisoned, tortured and killed, was especially contested. For several years visitors were shown around the inconspicuous and empty shell of the building in guided tours but the feeling was that the space needed to be interpreted to fulfil its full educational mandate. The association of former political prisoners (Asociacion de Ex-Detenidos-Desaparecidos) (AEDD) has argued for a museal 'reconstruction, on the basis of testimonies from surviving prisoners, of the dismantled death camp's installations, as long as it is made explicit to visitors that they are in the presence of a reconstruction rather than the original' (Andermann 2012: 87). With the planned opening of the 'Museum of Memory' in March 2014, Christina Kirchner's government appeared to have institutionalized the human rights movement's version of the past as the official government version. But although the museum makers had gone to great pains by only using non-invasive audiovisual installations, which do not alter the structure of the building, creating walk-ways so that any forensic evidence that the buildings may still hold is preserved and not disturbed by visitors, the museum's opening was delayed due to major opposition. Survivors and family members of the disappeared were apprehensive of the potential effects of this form of musealization. Their fear had been that the space may be turned into a major tourist attraction, in which the ghosts of the building would not so much be allowed to speak but rather would be silenced by the voices of curators and artists. They were concerned, in other words, that the 'Museum of Memory' may foster fossilized forgetting rather than lived remembering, and that the building could gain aesthetic potency and so suggest a form of closure. Survivors' resistance was a way of reclaiming their entitlement and power over the place. Any kind of material intervention or remodelling of the space was seen as disrespectful towards the victims and the traumatic reality they experienced as well as interfering with the testimonial function of the building.

Places of trauma and violence can intentionally be allowed to fall into ruin because the horrific events, which happened at these sites, render any sanitizing interference inappropriate and insensitive. At the same time the ruins of ESMA need to be preserved because the materiality of the place still holds valuable forensic evidence and authenticates what happened there,

which is vital not only for the court cases in which many of the torturers and murderers are being brought to justice, but also for family members of those who were 'disappeared' and are still unaccounted for. Any bodily traces hold the potential for judicial evidence, but are also remains that stand in for the bodies that were never recovered.

However, the forensically dense materiality of the space does not necessarily help visitors, who have no or very little knowledge about the events and their political contexts, 'to understand the haunting elements of disappearance' (Gordon 2008: 81). Diana Taylor asks the vital question of all site-specific memorials: 'How does *being there* affect what and how we know?' (Taylor 2009: 13). According to Paul Williams the site-specificity and the 'unanticipated *feel* of the place' contribute to a form of understanding that cannot be achieved through 'highly choreographed, user-tested, education department approved' exhibitions (2007: 182).

Visitors who had participated in the guiding-tours around the former Officers' Club which were based on survivors' testimonies, report that they were shocked by the very mundanity and non-monumentality of the building, and by the fact that ESMA was situated in the middle of an affluent suburban district of Buenos Aires, in such close proximity to everyday life (Draper 2012: 170). It is this seemingly ordinariness that makes these buildings so uncomfortable to witness and literally brings it home that state violence and systemic inhumanity, which enable individual cruelty to thrive, are too close for comfort. But one should not forget that the building also appears inconspicuous because the military made sure that it was stripped down to its 'bare bones', with interior walls dismantled so to make it unrecognizable to former detainees, a deliberate undoing in an attempt to erase, obfuscate and hide evidence.

The visitors of the ruined Officers' Casino are forced to confront the afterwardsness (*Nachträglichkeit*) of their experience: in contrast to a museal recreation of the clandestine centre, which would allow the visitors to 'retrace' the steps of the victims and yet hold the narrative of this past at a safe

distance, the ruin resists any interpretative closure and creates a spatial-temporal situation in which the past cannot be contained, its unsettling excess leaking into the present as affective disturbance. The ruin stands for the 'structural transformability of society' and reminds visitors of the political struggle that preceded it. The logic of the ruin, in this instance, goes beyond the victimization of the disappeared, a narrative which all too often relies on the split between the human right to life and the right to politics, stripping the victims of their political convictions and activities, reframing them in the religious and familial configurations as the children of the madres suffering by the hands of the fathers (Draper 2012: 172).

Whenever ESMA is visually evoked for a distanced audience, the images hardly ever show the former Officers' Club in which the clandestine centre operated, not least because of the sheer ordinariness and indistinguishability of the gutted building. The iconic image that usually stands for ESMA's displaced significance is the Central Pavilion with its distinctive four white columns (**Image 3**). This prototypical classical architecture is reminiscent of the nineteenth-century museum, which has been revealed in postcolonial critique as an 'ideological apparatus in the business of fashioning docile subjects of nation' (Andermann 2012: 78/86). In this sense, the building is indeed evocative of a project of eliminating dissidence, a project that was pursued in a much more obvious, violent and brutal manner in the Argentinian clandestine centres. So one could argue that rather than displacing the memory and averting the gaze from the violent centre of ESMA, the emblematic image allows a possible insight into the working of the neo-liberal capitalist state and the tradition of its institutions—an insight that may also explain the deep mistrust of the museum and its function in society that characterizes the discussions around ESMA's potential commemorative functions.

In Argentina, then, it would seem that the ruin has the potential to resist the impulse to reclaim it for cultural activities as well as refuting didactic and instrumentalist desires to transform it into a national monument. In the disordered and liminal realm of the ruin, there are no easy lessons to learn

and nor does the disturbing fragmentary incompleteness of the ruin allow visitors to revert to empathy. The ruin insists on the forensic real but also allows for an unexpected and unsettling encounter that goes beyond pedagogically prescribed experience. So how can we account for the elusive affective charge of the ruin? Avery Gordon's concept of 'haunting' as an encounter that subverts the fixed categories of past and present, alive and dead, and presence and absence attempts just this: it links 'disappearance' as state-sponsored terror with haunting as the mode by which a public needs to confront and understand this very specific form of repression and violence. 'The disappeared', a word that sounds like a euphemism, is a term on which las madres ('the mothers') have always insisted. Many of the mothers still demand their children back alive, not because it would be too painful to acknowledge their death, but because they want to remind everybody that their children were not simply killed, but disappeared, 'missing but overwhelmingly present' (Gordon 2008: 112). This process was so invisible that the military was able to deny what was happening and yet visible enough to effectively terrorize and silence people. It was meant to 'produce ghosts to harrowingly haunt a population into submission' (Gordon 2008: 115). However, the mothers were not afraid to communicate with these spectres. Accepting the death of their children would, in fact, deny this process of 'ghosting' and, as a consequence, result in a tacit resolution for something that cannot be resolved in a situation in which the majority of the torturers and murderers have not yet been brought to justice and the military's archives of their crimes are still to be recovered. But even if the ruin allows for the experience of 'haunting', it will eventually turn to dust—to a materiality that is homogeneous, without memory, impossible to narrate. So it seems that folklore belief was right all along: there is not only a specific place but also a window of time not to be missed in which our encounter with ghosts can take place.

IV.

I am very aware that this article raises more questions than it answers around 'ruinophilia' (Boym 2010: 59), a 'ruin hype', which ranges from a

rekindled academic interest in the aesthetics of the fragment to current trends in memorial culture and the tourist industry. The ruin performs a visualization of different forms of mourning: we mourn loss, death, decay and destruction; man-made and natural catastrophes; humanity's futile *and* successful attempts to master nature; and nature's indifference to humans and their cruelty against one another. This may account for the unrelenting popularity of ruins: they allow us to confront the fraudulent dichotomies of nature versus culture, aesthetics versus politics, haunting versus nostalgia, and memory versus history.

So, is it ethically problematic that the ruin conflates the ravages of time, the destructive potential of natural forces and the violence of man, and that it refuses to determine meaning and control representation? Or is this conflation precisely where the virtue of the ruin resides: in its capacity to allow for a form of mourning that acknowledges the 'contrapuntal relationship of human, historical, and natural temporality' (Boym 2010: 59) as well as insisting on memory as process, as something that opposes any fixed form? How can ruins assist the work of political mourning? Do we need to conceive memorial ruins differently, depending on whether they commemorate gradual decay and mortality, a natural catastrophe, or various types of governmental, military or economic violence? Could the aesthetic of the ruin dangerously confuse very different forms of terror, violence and violation, directed against other nations, political opponents or ethnic minorities, perhaps even rendering invisible human agency and erasing the specificities of the historical context? Or may the ruin help us to discern where these structures and practices of violence converge?

Should we distinguish between the timely and the untimely, the so-called natural and the violent death, death by decay or by a single act of destruction, destruction wrecked by human beings or by nature? And how easy is it to distinguish between them? Was the sinking of the Titanic a natural or a man-made disaster or both? Is one of the reasons for the ongoing fascination with this particular catastrophe due to the fact that nature and culture come together, like they do in the ruin? What are the actual status of

'natural catastrophes' in times of dangerously high greenhouse gas emissions, mass deforestation and rising sea levels?

And what exactly constitutes a catastrophe? It is not necessarily the quantifiable aspects of a destructive event that determine what we perceive as a catastrophe: both the sinking of the Titanic and the 9/11 terror attack had relatively few victims compared to epidemics, wars and natural disasters. Gray and Kendrick argue that the key criterion is the 'shattering of existing paradigms', the 'cognitive disorientation' and the 'profound sense of cultural disruption across the members of the affected community' (Gray and Kendrick 2004: 7). It is literally a rupture in the very fabric of society. Just like the ruin 'the term "rupture" ... implies damage but not quite disintegration, discontinuity but not quite a definite end' (Gray et al. 2004: 9).

While it is important to acknowledge catastrophes, it is equally important not to dissolve our engagement with catastrophic events in an 'undifferentiated world of hurt' in which the causes and contexts of that suffering are obscured (Gray et al. 2004: 9). This is not an argument that champions a cognitive and reflective stance over an emotional encounter with the past, but the attempt to avoid facile and self-righteous identification with depoliticized 'victims'. Instead it envisages a form of mourning in which visitors are affected by the past in a way that would enable them to experience their own position and role in the complex micro- and macrostructures of fear, which cannot safely be positioned as the 'other' in terms of time, geography and ideology. Memorial ruins are about the effects on people in the here and now, just as much, if not more, than they are about the suffering of those who are remembered.

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NOTES

1 William Wordsworth, Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798.

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