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INTERSECTIONALITY IN NATASHA BROWN'S ASSEMBLY²³

Natasha Brown's debut novel Assembly (2021) positions its black, female, British narrator at the intersection of colonial racial legacy, immigrant experience, class divides and exploitative (neo)liberal practices, insidious misogyny, and a tectonic shift introduced by a cancer diagnosis. This paper's research methodology encompasses interpretations of the dynamics of power, modes of oppression, and structures of privilege within theories of intersectionality. Specifically, the "imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" as defined by bell hooks provides a useful framework for understanding Brown's (millennial) vignettes which recall fragments of memory and introspection. The novel's interpretation reveals playgrounds of dehumanizing, indoctrinating gazes, of diversity rooted in tokenism, and of supposed equality based on the neoliberal view of the individual as autonomous and free, which hides a sterile, hierarchical paradigm that commodifies and suppresses dissenting voices. The purposefully unresolved polysemy of an "assembly", which stands for a place of dissenting identifications, of performative ritual, and of the novelistic form itself is left to loom large over Brown's narrative.

Keywords: Natasha Brown, *Assembly*, English novel, intersectionality, colonial legacy, imperialism, misogyny, race

In conversation with Alice McCrum at the American Library in Paris in January 2023, Natasha Brown speaks in an almost inaudible voice, yet without self-effacement. Rather, her tone draws authority from serenity, although one senses a carefully curated persona upholding such calm. Brown is in control, the self-aware control of a millennial who has all the arguments but makes peace with her inability to change anything significant about the world she deconstructs. She proposes no moral high ground, no straightforward solutions, and is very reticent about condemning any one of her characters' actions.

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In another interview, Brown emphasizes nuance in her writing: "it's a nuance that requires acknowledgement, and empathy. Without that, I think it's harder to have meaningful conversations" (Brown, Deleva 2021). Her debut novel *Assembly* (2021) rests on such nuance and narrative attempts at understanding rather than morally (and hypocritically) dismissing perspectives which do not align with liberal ethical values, but which are very much supported and maintained by the neoliberal market and the social environment it espouses.

The novel itself is set in 2019 and follows approximately thirty hours in the life of its unnamed protagonist and narrator. It is composed of short vignette-like chapters, indicative of our internet-fuelled obsession with shortfrom content. Only the initial three short chapters are narrated in the third person, portraying the racially charged, insidiously exploitative social playground in contemporary Britain and specifically its professional sector. The novel's female protagonist – an emotionally dissociated, financial professional in her early thirties – is superficially akin to the novel's author, who herself worked for a decade in London's financial sector following her graduation from Cambridge, and who is, like her protagonist, of Jamaican origin. Brown, however, does not resemble the narrative voice of Assembly intimately. The novel's protagonist is involved with an old-money, upper-class man, and she has recently received a cancer diagnosis – one that pushes her into a re-examination of the intersectional frameworks which make up her lived experience. What this paper aims to explore are the nuances of the dynamics of power, modes of oppression, and structures of privilege, which qualify the intersections of British colonial racial legacy in Assembly, its class divides, exploitative (neo)liberal practices, and pervasive misogyny.

Since interdisciplinarity underlies the theoretical and methodological tools of intersectionality, the following interpretation of *Assembly* can integrate literary analysis and the contextualization of the novel within the capitalist demands of the publishing market. In interpretive close reading, publishing is often sidelined as if it happened in a vacuum. Brown has, however, spoken openly about the requirements posed by the market and how they influenced and somewhat predetermined the conceptualization of her novel (Brown, Toll 2022)⁴. The publishing industry demands of first-time authors to perform their novels as promotional material, which is easier to market when the work is connected to the author autobiographically. Brown's narrative world is therefore intentionally constructed to, in its overarching propositions, align with how her own life could be (and conventionally is) qualified and contextualized. The scene of the assembly in the novel, when the protagonist addresses a group of schoolchildren to promote the banking profession, metanarratively points to this issue affecting the novel as a product and as a narrative genre.

^{4 &}quot;There's a very limited range for the sort of book someone like me can publish, at least as a debut. (Arguably due to a cycle of selection and confirmation bias at play within the cultural sector.) But I took that narrow scope as a creative challenge, starting from the narrative restrictions of the genre I was effectively confined to, and attempting to reveal and examine its conventions from within." (Brown, Toll 2022)

I'd rather say something else. Something better. But of course, without the legitimacy of a flashy title at a blue-chip company, I wouldn't have a platform to say anything at all. Any value my words have in this country is derived from my association with its institutions: universities, banks, government. I can only repeat their words and hope to convey a kind of truth. Perhaps that's a poor justification for my own complicity. (Brown 2022: 23)

To make a novel available to the public, the author is required to assume a role which an existing platform can accommodate and promote. In repeating established narrative paradigms, one can at best hope to "convey a kind of truth" in reiteration which aims at reconstruction. Such an endeavour, however, is always tinged with complicity that working within the existing social, cultural, and economic parameters demands. Brown asks that we be suspicious of her novel, of the requirements it needed to fulfil to be publishable, the cultural trends it tackles, the form it assumes, the vocabulary it uses to address a (specific) audience.

The epigraph of Brown's novel, which is also implicated in the notion of the assembly, is a Biblical quotation from Ecclesiastes 4:4, "This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind." Ecclesiastes is a transliteration of the Greek translation of the Hebrew word קהלת (romanticized as *Qōhelet*), which translates to preacher, specifically "speaker in assembly"5. The preacher is "the son of David, king in Jerusalem" (New International Version, Eccles. 1:1), professing that human striving is meaningless, all vanity and futility, that "there is nothing new under the sun" (Eccles. 1:9). Ambition is deemed useless, and wisdom interchangeable with ignorance. What remains is to fear God and enjoy His gifts in life, because ultimately, we all die and are forgotten, without ever being able to judge between right and wrong with absolute authority. The assembler's words collect the worldly before the divine and pronounce it meaningless. Assembly's narrator desires a similar freedom to speak about the meaninglessness of a profession in the financial sector, in her own choreographed preaching about the benefits of a financial career in front of audiences of schoolchildren. "Because even today, the mother country hasn't loosened her grip. Britain continues to own, exploit and profit from land taken during its twentieth-century exploits. Burning our futures to fuel its voracious economy. Under threat of monetary violence. Lecturing us, all the while, about self-sufficiency." (Brown 2022: 87–88) But the Biblical Prophet's nihilism does not renounce God. Rather, it arises out of faith in and fear before God. Brown's unnamed narrator, however, lives in a godless world, in which her nihilism, unsupported by a trust in social institutions or a sense of belonging to a community, verges on the extreme when she contemplates inaction regarding her cancer diagnosis and informs her oncologist that she would not be seeking treatment.

Assembly is aware of itself, of its being a product and a work of literature. A character, especially one that is viewed as non-normative – be they racially, ethnically, socio-economically, or otherwise marked as "not neutral" and therefore "other" – is expected to represent the marginalized demographic

⁵ Translation from Bible Hub: https://biblehub.com/hebrew/6953.htm.

they belong to. That expectation is itself a prejudice occluded by the readerly blind spot afforded either by belonging to the said norm or by the assumption that the norm is natural, unquestionable, and unchangeable. In Assembly, the narrator quotes from bell hooks' text "Postmodern Blackness" when she addresses the issue of "[h]ow can we engage, discuss, even think through a post-colonial lens, when there's no shared base of knowledge? When even the simplest accounting of events – as preserved in the country's own archives – wobbles suspect as tin-foil-hat conspiracies in the minds of its educated citizens?" (Brown 2022: 87) Hers is a 21st-century reconfiguration of what hooks worked out theoretically within the framework of intersectionality, that "the contemporary discourse which talks the most about heterogeneity, the decentered subject, declaring breakthroughs that allow recognition of Otherness, still directs its critical voice primarily to a specialized audience that shares a common language rooted in the very master narratives it claims to challenge." (hooks 2002: 423) In either case, the group which considers itself to be the norm dictates the acceptable level of recognizing, critiquing, and confronting issues which concern the "other".

It ought to be remembered that the origins of intersectionality as a theory and a methodology were closely connected to identity politics and that, separate from binary definitions of identity, intersectionality would not have emerged as a useful theory. A dynamic, holistic approach to understanding human experiences, relations, and perceptions already incorporates "intersectionality" by default, but the term is useful for critical analysis, especially in the context of Western conceptualizations of identity, society, and ethics (see Yuval-Davis 2009: 56–57). Additionally, in the collection of essays *The Intersectional Approach: Transforming the Academy through Race, Class, and Gender* (2009), contemporary scholars, among whom Kimberle Crenshaw, the legal theorist responsible for the term *intersectionality*, urge for a reduced focus on further theoretical categorizations which serve identity politics and a move toward their transdisciplinary application for the resolution of issues of (systemic) oppression⁷.

One of the greatest pitfalls of identity politics is entrapping radical discourse in attempts to normalize the status quo through solidifying categories of identity. While these categories assist representation of the

^{6 &}quot;We must engage decolonization as a critical practice if we are to have meaningful chances of survival..." (Brown 2022: 86)

^{7 &}quot;Any attempt to essentialize 'blackness' or 'womanhood' or 'working classness' as specific forms of concrete oppression in additive ways inevitably conflates narratives of identity politics with descriptions of positionality as well as constructing identities within the terms of specific political projects. Such narratives often reflect hegemonic discourses of identity politics that render invisible experiences of the more marginal members of that specific social category and construct an homogenized 'right way' to be its member. Ironically, this was exactly the reason black women and members of other marginalized groupings felt the need for what is known today as an intersectional analysis, except that, in such identity politics constructions, what takes place is actually fragmentation and multiplication of the wider categorical identities rather than more dynamic, shifting, and multiplex constructions of intersectionality." (Yuval-Savis 2009: 46)

underprivileged and the marginalized, they also run the risk of erasing the diversity of their experiences when, in order to be heard, they are required to align with a particular, codified identity. This essentialist codification is what hooks warns about in "Postmodern Blackness", while still recognizing that representation matters and that certain categories have helped the dispossessed speak and be heard.

Employing a critique of essentialism challenges colonial imperialist paradigms of black identity which represent blackness one-dimensionally in ways that reinforce and sustain white supremacy. This discourse created the idea of the 'primitive' and promoted the notion of an 'authentic' experience, seeing as 'natural' those expressions of black life which conformed to a pre-existing pattern or stereotype. Abandoning essentialist notions would be a serious challenge to racism. Contemporary African-American resistance struggle must be rooted in a process of decolonization that continually opposes re-inscribing notions of 'authentic' black identity. This critique should not be made synonymous with a dismissal of the struggle of oppressed and exploited peoples to make ourselves subjects. Nor should it deny that in certain circumstances this experience affords us a privileged critical location from which to speak. (hooks 2002: 426)

According to hooks, postmodernism and poststructuralism have their place in discourses on race and can work in tandem with intersectionality. Theoretical ideas initially proposed by authors who aimed to socially, culturally, economically, and (geo)politically contextualize black experiences, although radical in the 1980s, now permeate academic settings, from classrooms and student organizations, to policy makers' boardrooms and Universities' admission offices. Concurrently, this ideological transference into the mainstream implies a reduction, calcification, and disengagement of those radical ideas from their initial context. Where contexts reemerge is through the very marginalized experiences they were meant to explain, situate within larger paradigms, and offer solutions for, if they were perceived to be grounded in exploitation, discrimination, or abjection. What is required are continually reconfigured stories, visions, and approaches, to resist essentialisms and respect the authority of varied lived experiences, alongside an evolving critical vocabulary and interpretative paradigms.

In Assembly, many experiences recognized in the West as marginal collide. Partly, they do so via an intersectionality that expands representation and understanding, but Brown also combines with an almost statistical precision the marginal identities aligned with current publishing trends. Evidently, Assembly makes palpable the interlapping, codependent schemas employed in profiling marginalized individuals within different social contexts. Despite the narrator's established position in her company, there is an expectation for her to assume service work – when the men are incapable of working out the coffee machine, she makes espressos for everyone. "The men, relieved, say oh, thank you." (Brown 2022: 27) Her professional trajectory is overdetermined by decision-making unrelated to merit, although "meritocracy' as a metric affords her opportunities that 'race' would have disqualified her from" (Brown,

Deleva 2021). She is consistently made the object of microaggressions from her male colleagues who feel entitled to her benefits, which they ascribe to affirmative policies regarding diversity.

It's so much easier for you blacks and Hispanics.

He says that's why I was chosen, over qualified guys like him. He says he's not opposed to diversity. He just wants fairness, okay?

Okay? he says again.

Okay?

I am still a few sentences behind. But okay, okay, okay. (Brown 2022: 55–56)

The progressive inclusiveness of the company is only simulated, to project an image of alignment with the politically correct demands of that specific cultural moment. In fact, tokenism and prejudice emerge as the driving forces of those in power, while the narrator is left with feelings of insecurity and anxious dread under the continuous threat of being denied a position at the table. "There's no success, only the temporary aversion of failure." (Brown 2022: 28)

Dread is an inherent property of the narrator's constant assimilation, which is described as a process that demands a strategic approach if it aims at success, but one that is ultimately unsustainable in the long run, given that it is imbued with violence directed at the self. Because nothing ultimately or ever satisfies in that respect.

Always, the pressure is there. *Assimilate*, *assimilate*... Dissolve yourself into the melting pot. And then flow out, pour into the mould. Bend your bones until they splinter and crack and you fit. Force yourself into their form. *Assimilate*, they say it, encouraging. Then frowning. Then again and again. And always there, quiet, beneath the urging language of tolerance and cohesion – disappear! Melt into London's multicultural soup. Not like Lou. Not here. Not into this. (Brown 2022: 78)

Lou is one of the narrator's male colleagues, implicitly misogynist, racist, unaware of his own privilege. The assimilation she speaks of implies mediocrity, fitting into an average lifestyle which has almost no social capital, one that could readily be exploited by the capitalist system for its own survival. "I am what we've always been to the empire: pure, fucking profit. A natural resource to exploit and exploit, denigrate, and exploit." (Brown 2022: 47) The narrator's boyfriend labels her political inclinations as "Blairite" (Brown 2022: 62) to his father, but he can speak of her only in reference to her masking practices, both public and private. Intimately, however, the narrator suffers immensely from having to be nonchalant about the oppression she experiences despite her professional success. Having aligned with the neoliberal expectations of the 21st century, made exponentially more difficult due to her Jamaican background, the narrator assumes a professional role within the banking sector, where she meticulously and adamantly aligns her narrative with that of the neoliberal success story, which, for all its convoluted exploitative practices, is made available to her in the fluctuating shifts that nibble away (though not significantly) at the British class system.

Poststructuralist theory may posit that no individual is a separate self, an autonomous whole independent of the socio-economic, cultural, and discursive contexts one is enmeshed in. The completely self-sufficient individual is a mere idealization, an ossified, neoliberal construct. But it is a construct which is utilizable and profitable and therefore maintained as a conditioning frame for those whom the capitalist system can most readily exploit. The narrator suffers the consequences of trying to identify with that construct, to align with it in order to favourably position herself in society and confirm her worth.

Generations of sacrifice; hard work and harder living. So much suffered, so much forfeited, so much – for this opportunity. For my life. And I've tried, tried living up to it. But after years of struggling, fighting against the current, I'm ready to slow my arms. Stop kicking. Breathe the water in. I'm exhausted. Perhaps it's time to end this story. (Brown 2022: 13)

The narrator is almost ecumenical in her attempts to understand the position of characters around her, who, like her, have or have had their own uphill battles: the underdog narrative her colleague Lou weaves about himself, "from Bedford to midway up the corporate ladder with a two-bed two-bath in a W9 postcode" (Brown 2022: 77–78); the desire of her boyfriend's mother for the "preservation of a way of life, a class, the necessary higher echelon of society" with "an uncertainty beneath [her] hostility that [the narrator] almost identified with" (Brown 2022: 25), the uncertainty stemming from being wealthy by marriage, not owning anything in her own name; or her boyfriend's self-effacing performances, whom she treats in a more obviously ironic tone, "a boy who himself understands, in his flesh and bones and blood and skin, that he was born to helm this great nation – upon which the sun has never set." (Brown 2022: 99)

The boyfriend is apparently innocuous, but he gradually emerges as an uncannily insidious character. "He has wealth. Tied up in assets in trusts and holding companies with complicated ownership arrangements. Things he pretends to refuse to understand. Compounded over generations. What's the difference? he asks. I tell him. One of us goes to work at six a.m. each morning. The other sits browsing the papers at the café down the road." (Brown 2022: 43–44) Unrestrained power and inherited privilege are nominally oppositional to Western democratic values, but they, in fact, work in tandem with those same values. The boyfriend's father takes for granted the platform from which he "wielded words with deft precision, like a physical instrument. A scalpel, perhaps, or a quill." (Brown 2022: 24) Who has the right to speak and write, especially from a place of perceived neutrality which affords exclusivity protected by a shibboleth, is the question which reveals the power disparities among different social strata in *Assembly*. Unlike her boyfriend and his father, the narrator knows she must struggle to make herself heard.

Alright, I try it. I tell a story. But he [the boyfriend] demands more. He wants to know who did what, specifically, and to whom. How did it feel? (Give him visceral physicality.) Who is to blame? (A single, flawed individual. Not a system or society or the complicity of an undistinguished majority in maintaining the status quo...)

And what does it teach us? How will our heroine transcend her victimhood? Tell him more, he encourages. He says he's listening. He wants to know.

What else could I say – how much detail is enough? Enough to unlock thoughts or understanding or even something basic, human, empathetic within him. It's just not there. Or, I can't speak to it. *My only tool of expression is the language of this place*. Its bias and assumptions permeate all reason I could construct from it. These words, symbols arranged on the page (itself a pure, unblemished vehicle for objective elucidation of thought), these basic units of civilization – how could they harbour ill intent? (Brown 2022: 88–89, emphasis added)

Another poststructuralist dictum teaches us that there is no neutrality in language, but it is the "others", who are never allowed even a semblance of said neutrality, who experience that lack viscerally. Audre Lorde wrote in her text on intersectionality in feminism that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may temporarily allow us to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those Women who still define the master's house as their only source of support." (Lorde 1983: 99) The narrator of Assembly cannot find the appropriate tools to convey herself because she has no community, but "only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression" (Lorde 1983: 99).

Assembly hides within its conceptual framework the philosophical notion of assemblage, which for Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 71–74, 100) stands for the rhizomatic structure of social and material configurations, one that challenges the idea of the independent, autonomous agency of the individual, and emphasizes relational interdependence, emergent contingency, dynamism of stratification, and heterogenous multiplicity. Brown's assembly is connected to this poststructuralist notion of how one's fluctuating affiliations are contextualized and how they interrelate. The maintenance and dissipation of desire lie at the forefront of Assembly, as the narrator gradually gains a voice and ultimately hints at disengaging from the dominant socio-cultural paradigm. She believes that her coming faceto-face with death, or its imminent arrival, gives her an opportunity not to respond to any interpellations and finally make a choice which is radically her own. However, while the novel employs deconstruction as its narrator's tool of methodically dissecting the world and herself8, it leaves her completely entrenched in the choices offered by the territorial paradigm she inhabits. Deleuze and Guattari note that "there is no desiring-machine capable of being assembled without demolishing entire social sectors [...] and no society can tolerate a position of real desire without its structures of exploitation, servitude, and hierarchy being compromised" (1983: 116). The narrator supposedly realizes agency only in the act of potentially killing herself through inaction, because every action within the system designed not to validate her as a human being is seen as conforming to that system.

^{8 &}quot;Towards the end, she alters form at will – using footnotes, poetry, embedded quotes, flowery description, straightforward imperatives, dialogue, and a meta-discussion of the novel that contains her." (Brown, Deleva 2021)

It's a fictionalization of who I am, but my engagement transforms the fiction into truth. My thoughts, my ideas – even my identity – can only exist as a response to the partygoers' words and actions. Articulated along the perimeter of their form. Reinforcing both their selfhood, and its centrality to mine. How else can they be certain of who they are, and what they aren't? Delineation requires a sharp, black outline. (Brown 2022: 68–69)

The intersectional inclusivity promoted and performed by the narrator of Assembly is the simulation which eats away at her. Conversely, letting go is difficult because it leads to invisibility, at least in reference to the assemblage of structural relationships she confirms and conforms to via her interpellative choices. At another point, the narrator proclaims to "[e]xist in the negative only, the space around" (Brown 2022: 58) other people: "I am the stretched-taut membrane of a drum, against which their identity beats. I cannot escape its rhythm." (Brown 2022: 96) Still, her grand escape plan – not to make any decision regarding her cancer diagnosis - in the overall context of the novel which is narrated by a dissociated, increasingly analytical voice, appears exploitative. But only because Brown empowers her narrator's decision so explicitly that no ambivalence is allowed in terms of interpretation. Not to receive treatment is presented as the narrator's ultimate act of autonomous agency, without indicators which would grant an ironic reading. "Surviving makes me a participant in their narrative. Succeed or fail, my existence only reinforces this construct. I reject it. I reject these options. I reject this life. Yes, I understand the pain. The pain is transformational – transcendent – the undoing of construction. A return, mercifully, to dust." (Brown 2022: 96) On the other hand, this only becomes an issue if we take the narrator to be the representative of a marginalized group, without allowing her the very idiosyncratic autonomy she desperately desires.

On a more overarching plane, the cancer diagnosis in *Assembly* is situated within the "Weathering Hypothesis" which posits a "link between systemic discrimination and the poor health outcomes experienced by black women" (Brown, Deleva 2021). In her conversations with her mother, the narrator is continually exposed to the devastating number of deaths within their community, although without the pathos of tragedy. Her mother frames the news in a punch-line format, "invoking memories of a person, of a life, then unveiling the death." (Brown 2022: 15) But, as the narrator herself understands, "these frequent reports felt propelled by an unspoken loss. An exhaustive proof that we, whatever it was that bound us all together within the first-person plural, were not surviving." (Brown 2022: 15) The only reason the narrator can be proactive about her cancer diagnosis is that her employer - the banking industry which has a vested interest in keeping her alive and productive provides her with private health insurance, which allows for early screening and prompt treatment. Those who are forced to rely on the NHS might not have the same opportunity, which the statistical data demonstrate.

Assembly is a powerful debut novel, one that succinctly pierces through the essentialist narratives about the intersections of race, gender, and class. Intersectionality as a theory is useful for the interpretation of both the themes explored in the novel and its metanarrative relation to different disciplines and theories associated with intersectionality, especially poststructuralism and deconstruction. The narrative voice of *Assembly* goes through a transformation in terms of engaging her analytical self, of attempting for the first time to distance herself from the aspirational paths she was encouraged to follow. Hers is a struggle that does not yet see the potential in a radicalized community. She is an isolated millennial who undercuts her own attempts at reconfiguration. But she is also a character through whom Brown wanted to interrogate the "black millennial woman" fictional subgenre, in which sense she transcends personality and pokes holes in emancipatory narratives about black female liberation.

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Тијана 3. Матовић ИНТЕРСЕКЦИОНАЛНОСТ У РОМАНУ *ASSEMBLY* НАТАШЕ БРАУН

Резиме

У свом првом роману, Assembly (360p) (2021), Наташа Браун смешта британску нараторку црне боје коже на раскрсницу колонијалног расног наслеђа, класних подела и експлоатационих (нео)либералних пракси, подмукле мизогиније и тектонског поремећаја који у њен живот уноси дијагноза рака. Методологија истраживања у овом раду подразумева тумачење динамика моћи, облика потлачивања и структура привилегија у оквиру теорија интерсекционалности. Конкретно, "империјалистички бели надмоћни капиталистички патријархат", како га дефинише бел хукс, пружа корисни оквир за разумевање (миленијалских) вињета Наташе Браун, које призивају фрагменте сећања и интроспекције. Тумачење романа открива поља дехуманизације, индоктринишућих погледа, диверзитета укорењеног у токенизму и наводне једнакости која је заснована на неолибералној перцепцији појединца као аутономног и слободног, која крије стерилну, хијерархијску парадигму која потискује дивергентне гласове. Намерно неразрешена полисемија "збора", који представља место разноврсних идентификација, перформативног ритуала и коментара на саму романескну форму, остављена је да се надвија над наративом романа.

Кључне речи: Наташа Браун, *Збор*, енглески роман, интерсекционалност, колонијално наслеђе, империјализам, мизогинија, раса

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