

## Representation of Women's Roles in American Funeral Industry in *Buried by the Bernards*

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### Abstract

Following the Civil War, the funeral industry in the United States excluded women from the job of taking care of the deceased. But in the last 10 years, women have taken their place in the funeral industry again. This can be seen from the data recently that shows that 65% of funeral director program graduates are women. The role of women in the funeral industry can also be seen in one of the reality series on Netflix, *Buried by the Bernards*. Therefore, this research aims to analyze how the role of women in the funeral industry is represented in *Buried by the Bernards*. The series portrays the Bernards funeral home, managed by the Bernards family members. Three of whom are women, including Deja, Reagan, and Debbie. To answer the research question, the researcher used Hall's representation theory. This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach with primary data from the *Buried by the Bernards* Netflix reality series, and secondary data from books, theses, journals, articles, and online sources. The results of this research show that the American traditional belief that women are unable to work in funeral homes is not true. Based on *Buried by the Bernards*, women are portrayed as taking an important part in the funeral industry and their status as women does not prevent them from working in the funeral industry. Thus, researcher conclude that women can once again prove that they are equal and their abilities are not inferior to men, even in the funeral industry.

**Keywords:** *Buried by the Bernards*, funeral industry, gender equality, representation, woman role's

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## INTRODUCTION

Undertakers, funeral directors, or morticians are those who organize and manage the details of a memorial service for the departed. Death care was the responsibility of women in the 1800s when green burials were still common. Then, following the Civil War, it was believed that women were unable to understand the science of embalming, were too weak to assist in lifting bodies, and were too sensitive to witness sights that undertakers frequently saw (Cathles et al., 2010;

Wong, 2000). The social norms of the time could not resist these arguments. In the following years, the funeral industry was wholly taken over by men and became one of the jobs that demonstrated hegemonic masculinity.

In recent years, women have again taken over the role of death care, and this is increasing over time. Training programs for the next generation of funeral directors and directors prove there is a shift in gender roles in the funeral industry. In 2017, according to the American Board of Funeral Service Education, 65% of funeral director program

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graduates in the United States were women (Gonzales, 2023; Shaffrey, 2018). The re-presence of women in the funeral industry is not surprising, considering the developments and changes brought about by the voices of the struggle for gender equality that are present in society's social life as well as in the workplace. The reinstatement of women in the industry shows that what previously held back women in the funeral industry was entirely due to the limited voice of women in society.

Media is used to voice opinions, guide public opinion, and influence behaviour. Media can provide information about new norms and persuade individuals to accept them (Arias, 2019; Bandura, 1986; Dellavigna & Gentzkow, 2010). Netflix is one of the media that can speak out and influence society. Netflix has revolutionized TV development, distribution, consumption, and capitalization. In addition to bringing back limited series, it has solidified the TV series format as the primary medium for modern storytelling, just like the demonic novel, early modern theatre, medieval troubadours, and 20th-century movies did in earlier Western eras (Boán, 2024). The popularity of Netflix is unquestionable, as well as its active voice in voicing things that were previously considered taboo and making people accept it. One of the reality series Netflix has aired in recent years that tackles taboo themes in society is about funerals, *Buried by the Bernards* (2021).

Previously, research conducted by Beard & Burger (2020) showed that the majority of articles published between 2008 and 2015 concentrated on marketing and promotional tactics created to counter the negative impact of the recession on funeral home revenues. The majority of articles focused more on consumers' desire to "shop around" for funeral services and spend less money versus cremation as the preferred disposition method, although some articles still highlighted concerns about decreased profitability associated with increased cremation sales (Beard & Burger, 2020). Discussions about the role of women in the funeral industry are still not widely discussed. In this case, no one has researched the role of women in the funeral industry, as represented in *Buried by the Bernards*. This research can provide novelty in the conversation about the role of women in the funeral industry.

Therefore, the Netflix series *Buried by the Bernards*, which is a reality series, depicts the Bernard family, who run a funeral home called Bernard's Funeral Home Service. The series premiered on Netflix in 2021 with eight episodes. Regardless of dealing with social taboos, the show is

presented in a way that allows viewers to become engrossed in the narrative. The reality of the funeral home run by the Bernard family is humorously presented, making it easy for viewers to forget that they must care for the deceased. This funeral home is run by members of the Bernards family, including men and women. Women were once excluded from funeral homes and the industry; However, the series does not depict this as a job exclusively for men. Women are shown as workers and play an important role in Bernard's funeral homes services.

Therefore, it is interesting to see that after a long time, the undertaker was dominated by men and became one of the jobs that smacks of hegemonic masculinity, which is now starting to be entered by women and is beginning to show that the undertaker profession is a job without gender boundaries. This research aims to look at women role's in the funeral industry representation in *Buried by the Bernards* Netflix reality series, who are taking back roles in the funeral industry and whether they, as women in this industry, limit their movements compared to men in that profession

## METHODS

This research is American Studies research in the form of qualitative research, which is the overall term for studies concerned with classifying, analyzing, and interpreting works of literature. Both textual and visual data can be analyzed using this qualitative approach. The researcher is deeply involved in data collection and analysis using a qualitative descriptive approach and is the primary source of the resulting information. According to Creswell, qualitative research is a tool for investigating and understanding societal phenomena. By using this approach, researchers can better understand the experiences, attitudes, behaviours, and activities of the research subject and present a comprehensive and in-depth picture of the topic under research (Creswell, 2009).

Researchers use Stuart Hall's theory of representation to look at the representation of women in *Buried by the Bernards* Netflix reality series. Stuart Hall's theory of representation provides an understanding of the construction and formation of meaning through language and culture. Language is a crucial medium in this representation process, producing specific meanings that are transformed into a representation. However, to achieve this goal, language requires human interaction and cultural support; it cannot function in isolation. Representation always requires media, such as words, signs, or symbols, to communicate concepts, ideas, or information. The language uses signs to

represent various concepts under the notion of representation, including people, things, events, fictional objects, fantasy worlds, and even abstract ideas. Most media in the modern era often use images to explain and describe something that is their goal. Image can be a form of language because it can symbolize things (Hall, 1997).

Using Stuart Hall's theory of representation, researchers will explore women's characters in the funeral industry in the *Buries by the Bernards* Netflix reality series. Through this series, we can see the representation of women's roles in the funeral industry. Furthermore, the data in this research is divided into two categories: primary and secondary. Primary data in this research are taken from the *Buries by the Bernards*. The selected narration is chosen to examine how women's roles in the funeral industry are represented in *Buries by the Bernards*. Secondary data sources include books, theses, journals, articles, and online sources that can be used to supplement the analysis in this study. This secondary data completes the picture of women's roles in the funeral industry. These primary and secondary data are carefully studied to thoroughly understand the topic under consideration in this research.

The researcher classified the data and wrote it into a spreadsheet based on the classification, which used *Buries by the Bernards* as the main data source to identify and emphasize character interactions and behaviour in the Netflix reality series. Lastly, data that has been classified and selected is analyzed by the researcher. For this research, the researcher used thematic analysis to analyze the data. Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method that involves identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns and themes in data (Creswell, 2018). The researcher then described the collected data based on the context of the situation in each conversation that occurred in the data. Then, the researcher interprets the data based on Stuart Hall's representation theory. Finally, the researcher draws conclusions that explain the results of this study.

It is interesting to examine how the characters in the scene interact, the dialogue and symbols used, and how women's roles in the funeral industry, as the main focus of the research, are represented. The researcher selected dialogue and scenes that describe the role of women in the funeral industry in *Buries by the Bernards*. By examining the representation of women who work in the funeral industry, as represented in *Buries by the Bernards*, here we can see how the role of women in the funeral industry has been growing in recent years.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The employment landscape for women in America has changed significantly in the last fifty years. Women comprise a larger workforce, earn higher incomes, and occupy more of the highest-paying positions. When it comes to college education, women dominate men in the United States, according to Population Survey statistics at the end of 2023 (Schaeffer, 2024). This increase occurred in every aspect of work, which shows a shift from traditional norms in terms of work, which men conventionally dominate, and shifts in gender roles in society. The major working male-dominated careers that women are not included, are now starting to face a change.

The funeral industry is also participating in jobs previously dominated by men, now starting to include women in its landscape. This can be seen from the percentage that continues to increase. About 40 years ago, less than five percent of funeral homes were run by women in the United States, according to the New York Funeral Home Directors. Now, it is around 43 percent and will continue to increase with the visible change in the face of the New York Funeral Services Academy, most of whom are women (Puspadi, 2019).

In line with the explanation above, *Buries by the Bernards* reality series depicts the real life of funeral homes, and many aspects are shown that describe the funeral director or undertaker in the real-life Bernards funeral home service, including the representation of women in the funeral industry through the series. To understand more about the role of women in the funeral industry as represented in *Buries by the Bernards*, it is important to know a little about the history of the funeral industry in America and the position of women in the industry.

### Historical Context of Women in the Funeral Industry

In Anglo-Celtic culture when it comes to funeral terms, Lindsay Prior says that "only men carry the coffin and, in general, only women cry" (Prior, 1989). Women are considered inappropriate to be involved in organizing funerals or going to graves. In America, in the early 19th century, caring for the dead was a very dominant role for women. The community has a group of women who come to help the bereaved families to lay the bodies of the deceased. A viewing was held at the house before the final resting place and church were reached in a procession. Until the 1800s, American families typically cared for their deceased themselves (Whig, 2022). As the researcher mentioned in the introduction, the male dominance in the funeral industry in America dates back to the Civil War,

which marginalized women in the industry (Cathles et al., 2010; Wong, 2000). During the Civil War, there was an increasing need to bring the bodies of soldiers who died on the battlefield home with the help of embalming which was done to prevent the bodies from decomposing.

At the beginning of the war, surgeons performed embalming and it became a new profession. Thomas Holmes (1817-1900), considered the father of modern embalming, experimented with preservative chemicals while an assistant coroner in New York. Embalmers would pump chemical solutions into the body through the arteries to prevent decomposition, making it possible to send a soldier's body home. After the War ended, society at large stopped embalming, considering it a barbaric and immoral act against the body. However, in the early 20th century, embalming became increasingly common. At first, embalming was done in the home by an undertaker, but as funeral homes became more popular as a place to take death matters into account, the practice of embalming became more popular (Kelly, 2020; Parson, n.d.). This is also a concern for Jessica Mitford at the meeting, as funeral directors try to take as much advantage of grieving families as possible (Mitford, 2011). Thus, despite the discourse that undertakers try to make the most of the grieving family, the researcher sees that most of the speakers are undertakers or funeral directors who are mostly or even all men as the word 'funeral man' is used by undertakers.

Funeral associations in the United States are highly sex-segregated. While funeral directing involves work that deals with women's emotions, the funeral director is expected to act as a caregiver for the bereaved (Parsons, 2010; Pruitt, 2018). Assuming that women could not perform embalming, could not lift the corpse and were too sensitive to look at the corpse, women were excluded from the conversation of the funeral industry. As of 2017, according to the American Board of Funeral Service Education, 65% of funeral director programs graduates in the United States were women (Fisher, 2015; Gonzales, 2023; Shaffrey, 2018). Therefore, it is safe to say that women are once again taking their place in the funeral industry.

### **Women's Role Representation in the Funeral Industry through *Buried by the Bernards***

The duties of a funeral director or undertaker include helping the family choose between cremation and burial, then helping the family select a casket or urn for the deceased, preparing an obituary to announce the death, scheduling the wake, funeral and/or burial,

arranging pallbearers and clergy for religious ceremonies, arranging a cremation, or opening/closing the grave with a burial site, embalming the body for viewing if desired, offering to counsel to grieving family and friends, providing transportation for mourners and the deceased, arranging for the pickup and transportation of the body out of state or out of the country or simply from home after death, filing death certificates and other legal documents, and transferring pension funds, or insurance policies (Goodwin University, 2020). Some of the tasks above require physical strength and mental endurance, which previously raised doubts that women were not capable of doing these things, so men dominated jobs in the funeral industry. As the feminist movement began to express itself, it also influenced the American funeral industry, allowing women to campaign against cultural and political inequality, breaking down the 'glass ceiling' that had held back previous generations (Nuspliger Associates, 2010).

In line with the explanation above, women began to enter the funeral industry, as depicted in *Buried by the Bernards*. As this series is a reality series, everything shown in the series happened in real life. Family members and several other workers run the Bernards funeral home services. There are three women in the family members who are also involved in handling the funeral home services. Some of these characters include Debbie, Raegan, and Deja.

In the first episode of *Buried by the Bernards*, they introduce us to the Bernards family, which runs the Bernards funeral home services. Deja, 24 years old, works as a funeral director apprentice, and Raegan, 18 years old, is the office assistant under their father, Ryan, the funeral director at that funeral home. Apart from that, we are also introduced to Kevin, the facility manager who oversees the whole facility, and last but not least, Debbie, Ryan's mother, who works as the office manager. They are characters who play an essential role in *Buried by the Bernards*. Here's the thing: while this reality show pictures the actual funeral home, it's clear that this show was made for entertaining purposes. This program is wrapped in comedy, making the rarely discussed taboo about death and funerals less sad.

As explained in the first paragraph of this section, there is a lot of work in a funeral home. In line with this research, women are represented in *Buried by the Bernards*, play a significant role in the funeral industry. Deja, in the first episode, is seen doing decorations for a funeral to prepare for the funeral ceremony, including making them feel at home; she said, "*When they come, it'll smell like they're home*," in which case family and friends can view the

corpse at a funeral home comfortably. There is agreement about what constitutes a good death or a successful death. Meier researched agreement about this and the top theme of preferences for the death process with sub-themes dealing with death preparations, one of which is a good funeral arrangement (Meier et al., 2016). In this case, creating a good funeral, attractive funeral decorations, and a comfortable funeral home support this. In other words, what Deja does is one of the essential things at a funeral. She said, "*I host the funeral. I'm here to greet the family*". Hosting a funeral means that, Deja becomes an important part in organizing funeral home services to achieve what constitutes a good death or a successful death. This is proof of breaking the old stereotype that women cannot be included in the funeral industry.

In America, before the Civil War, funeral homes were traditionally held in the homes of the deceased. Before being buried, the body was on display at the house for friends and family to view. These days, the funeral home is typically the site of a wake or farewell celebration. In a casket, the body is on display during the funeral rituals. The family's desires will determine whether the coffin is open or closed. Attendees of the last memorial service are frequently invited to sign a book that is held by the bereaved. The bereaved family members may put up pictures of the departed, jewellery, or other artefacts that highlight the person's accomplishments or interests (Whig, 2022). Those traditions, which continue to this day in America and are taken over by funeral homes, have become one of the standards of a good funeral if performed well. This is what Deja, in *Buried by the Bernards*, does when hosting a funeral to achieve a good funeral service.

In the same episode, Raegan is assigned by his father to try to pick up a corpse. In the funeral homes, the cars used to pick up and deliver corpses are called hearses, and in this series, they still use this term, even though there is new terminology used to refer to this; hearses are "coaches" or "professional cars" (Mitford, 2011). Raegan said, "*Every time I see a hearse, I think of death. I don't like to think of death*". Reagan was assigned by his father to learn to drive a hearse and then practice 'picking up a body,' which, in other words, picked up a corpse. Reagan helps lift the corpse and transfer it to the hearse. Picking up the body, either from the home of the bereaved family or from the mortuary to prepare the corpse for further processes to prepare for the funeral is one of the important roles of the funeral service. This is also a concern for traditional funeral directors who assume that women are unable to pick up the corpse and are therefore unable to take their place in the funeral service. It can be seen from

Raegan helping to lift the corpse, practically as evidence to counter the claim that women are too weak to lift a corpse.

In *Buried by the Bernards* first episode as well, Debbie, Ryan's mother, who works as an office manager, is tasked with picking up the bereaved family to attend the funeral and providing mental support to the bereaved. This is also one of the important tasks in the funeral industry that is even inherent in women, as funeral directors involve work that deals with women's emotions. Funeral directors are expected to act as caregivers for the bereaved. (Parsons, 2010; Pruitt, 2018). In *Buried by the Bernards*, Debbie seems to be very free in giving comfort to the grieving family, talking about the good things about the deceased, and as Debbie said "*the funeral was good. The family was happy. Everybody was happy. The whole damn family was happy. The even went online and posted something real nice about me.*" As a criterion for good funeral home services that can provide counselling to grieving family and friends, Debbie contributes to achieving the criteria for good funeral home services in Bernards funeral home services by providing counselling to grieving family and friends.

In the second episode, Deja and Raegan were sentenced to take care of the corpse directly by dressing and doing the corpse make-up to prepare it for the funeral. Deja said, "*Working here, it's like we are around the deceased, but that's not our part. Like we don't deal with the bodies, go in the embalming room, we don't fluid, touch none of that, see none of that.*" Essentially, this explains that they do not come into direct contact with dead bodies when working in funeral homes. They are more about providing support to the bereaved family, preparing for the family's arrival, organizing the funeral, and taking care of documents related to the death. Deja's statement represents that in funeral home services, there is a division of labour that has been arranged according to their respective roles. Embalmers is a profession that requires a license to care for and prepare the body before the funeral. Embalmers have special skills in caring for and preparing the body, including cleaning, preserving, and arranging the body so that it looks neat and presentable for the family and friends left behind. This job is important in paying final respects to the deceased (Abello et al., 2018). Deja, at Bernard Funeral Home Services, is not an embalmer and the fact that embalming requires a license means that Deja, Raegan or Debbie, the women in the series, do not perform embalming. However, this does not mean that women cannot perform embalming. As the author repeatedly mentions that, as of 2017, according to the American Board of Funeral Service Education,

65% of funeral director program graduates in the United States were women (Fisher, 2015; Gonzales, 2023; Shaffrey, 2018).

Furthermore, In the seventh episode of *Buried by the Bernards*, a funeral service education instructor came to Bernard's funeral services with four funeral service education students from Southwest Tennessee Community College. Three of them are women, and one of them is an embalmer. From this, we can see that the percentage of women in the funeral industry has increased even more than male students. This proves that the data showing that 65% of funeral director program graduates in the United States were women is in line with what is seen in *Buried by the Bernards*, and disproves the traditional assumption that women cannot become embalmers. Supporting this statement, funeral home services such as White Lady Funerals, which has an all-female staff (Handry, 2012).

In episode six, the three women in the series also discuss ideas with each other to create an advertisement for their funeral home and make a significant contribution to advertising filmmaking. Advertising for funeral homes may seem unrelated to funeral arrangements, but introducing your products to customers is indeed important in gaining customer engagement. Deja, Reagan, and Debbie are depicted as having important roles at the funeral home, including preparing advertisements for Bernard's funeral home services. This is intended to improve the funeral home's reputation in the community, increase its exposure, and attract more people who may need funeral services in the future. Although they are not embalmers, this is an important part of the services provided by funeral homes.

Additionally, mortuary science education graduates must be able to clearly explain the role and nature of funeral directors to the public they serve, and they must identify ethical principles and practices and provide mechanisms to further ethical growth in the profession. Graduates must clearly understand the public health standards required to preserve and handle bodies and be competent in the technical skills of preservation, including embalming (O'Brien, 2023). In line with this explanation, carrying out embalming requires competence and skills, which can be obtained through training in special funeral education, such as mortuary science education. In *Buried by the Bernards*, the women do not embalming and are even funeral director apprentices. Just like Deja said, "*I'm not an embalmer.*" It's not because she's a woman that she can't do embalming as the funeral directors of the previous years assumed women couldn't do, but simply because the women in the series don't

have a license and haven't learned the embalming techniques that require special education.

Thus, it is clear that the presence of students from Southwest Tennessee Community College, which women dominate, represents the reality that occurs according to several surveys found by some of the research above. Furthermore, Morgen Conn's research shows much record evidence of women working as licensed embalmers or "lady assistants" performing embalming in almost every US state between the 1880s and 1910s. Conn has found women from various racial backgrounds, religious backgrounds, and nationalities who were becoming licensed embalmers during this time. Though women of different backgrounds would have faced their struggles and challenges, there are many articles about women who speak highly of their skills and services in newspapers (Conn, 2023). In this context, if women were initially deemed incapable of entering the funeral industry, following Conn's research, it means that the assumption about women justifies the narrative of undertaking as a male profession and supports the anti-women embalmers.

Although women were omitted from funeral journals in the 20th century, there is no denying that the sexes in the industry are very strong. 'Sex' is different from gender but related. Sex is a person's physical characteristics, whether they are physically male or female. Keep in mind that it is important to realize that there is a difference between sexes and sexism so that this does not lead to destructive behaviour and discrimination. The funeral industry, while rarely exhausting, is often very physical. Workers have to shift whole bodies, move and manipulate these bodies to dress them, move empty coffins, and then carry filled coffins. Lighter wooden coffins average around 20kg, the average corpse is 50-70kg. The combination of all this is quite a heavy load to carry. Women are not as strong as men, as anyone should realize. It's not just about size, as men are generally bigger than women, but it also has to do with proportion and distribution. For example, women have more weight in their hips, while men have more weight in their upper body. (Handry, 2012).

Therefore, when talking about women's roles in the funeral industry, it is necessary to consider when saying, in general, that the funeral industry is sexist. Considering that the funeral industry requires most physical strength, men are generally stronger and have the physical support in heavy work, specifically lifting corpses and wooden coffins that total around 70-90 kg. Also, in the funeral industry, the important work is not only in caring for the corpse, which requires most of the strength. But the preparation for the funeral is no

less critical. As said by Meier et al. regarding considerations of a good death, namely preparation for death, one of which is a good funeral arrangement (Meier et al., 2016). Along with this, if seen in *Buried by the Bernards*, women are represented as taking an essential role in the funeral industry; even though it is not shown that women do embalming work in the show, it cannot be said that it is part of anti-women embalming or funeral industry as sexism but simply because it is not the job of women in the series.

The American traditional belief that women are unable to lift corpses, perform embalming, and witness the spectacle witnessed by undertakers, which has prevented women from entering the funeral industry, can be reconsidered. Women entering the funeral industry and filling funeral service education programs, which are increasing in number and graduates, show that in just a matter of time, women can become an equalizers in the funeral industry.

Based on the description above, in the funeral industry, which has historically been filled with gender stereotypes, in *Buried by the Bernards* women are represented as starting to re-enter the funeral industry and take an important role in the funeral process. As explained previously, before the Civil War, the task of taking care of corpses was still taken over by women and carried out at home, which then, after the Civil War changed and was taken over completely by men. This gave rise to the stereotype that women could not take part in the funeral industry because they were hindered by the physical and mental strength to take care of corpses. However, after seeing the representation of women in *Buried by the Bernards* who can handle corpse management, be it lifting the corpse, prepare the corpse, as well as providing emotional support for the grieving family and also how women dominate in the funeral school as in 2017, according to the American Board of Funeral Service Education, 65% of funeral director programs graduates in the United States were women (Fisher, 2015; Gonzales, 2023; Shaffrey, 2018). Based on the representation of women in *Buried by the Bernards* and the data showing the increase in funeral director program graduates, it is clear that there is a shift in stereotypes about women in the funeral industry. The stereotypes that women cannot lift bodies or cannot embalm are starting to disappear, making it easier for women to get involved in the funeral industry.

## CONCLUSION

Before the Civil War in America, women played an important role in funeral arrangements.

During the Civil War (1861-1865), the need for families to bring home the bodies of their relatives who died on the battlefield increased. At that time, embalming came in handy in dealing with the decomposition of corpses and embalmers became the norm for corpses in the late 19th century in America. At the same time, undertakers became a profession, from being taken care of at home to full-service funeral home services. The problem here is that at the end of the 19th century, women who initially took care of the corpse as a whole were then eliminated from the world of corpse management because they were considered unable to lift the virtual, unable to do embalming, and also considered unable to see the sights seen by the undertaker.

Today, women are once again taking part in the management of corpses. This is evident from the representation of women in *Buried by the Bernards*. Women in *Buried by the Bernards*, such as Debbie, Raegan, and Deja are represented as taking an important role in the funeral industry, and no less than the role of men in the industry. The thing is, in the series, women are not embalming or removing bodies because removing bodies is not their job and none of them are embalmers. However, in one of the episodes in the series, there is a scene where there is a visit from a funeral school, and most of them are women.

Furthermore, it can be said that the development of women's roles in the funeral industry is increasing. From the development of women as funeral school students and the increasing number of female graduates from these courses, it is only a matter of time before women become equal within the funeral industry. This has diminished the traditional funeral director's concern that women are not capable of doing work in funeral homes and being part of the funeral industry.

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