

# The past is another country: Narrative, identity and the achievement of moral consciousness in Afrikaans historiographical fiction

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## Abstract

*In André Brink's Devil's Valley the emphasis falls on stories. The important role that narratives play in a community to create a history and an identity for that community and for individuals in the community, is illustrated. The awareness of the importance of narratives in our lives has been acknowledged and studied in various fields (i.a. history – Hayden White; philosophy – Ricoeur, MacIntyre; psychology – Gergen; etc.). In this article, the importance of narratives for personal and collective identity is examined. In the novel the emphasis is on the effect of narratives about the past on identity and on "moral identity". Against this analysis of the novel as background, Afrikaans literature's recent "almost obsessive" involvement with the past is examined.*

## 1. Introduction: Stories, our first and ultimate dust

In André Brink's *Duiwelskloof* (1997)/*Devil's Valley* (1998a) Flip Lochner, driven by various personal motives, enters the mysterious "Devil's Valley" in order to write the history of its inhabitants. With the crime reporter's equipment – a tape recorder, a notebook and a camera – he sets off on his journey to gather the "facts" needed to write the history. He becomes more and more frustrated as the facts that he so fervently seeks, elude him. He remarks to Tant Poppie that he came to collect facts, but is left only with stories: "a hand full of feathers" (270).<sup>1</sup> After listening to yet another story about the past of the valley, narrated by Grandpa Lukas (Seer) Lermiet, Lochner, who admits that he is "moved" by the old man's story, reflects on the meaning of that particular story and of stories in general:

In spite of my suspicion and resentment, I felt moved by something in the old fucker, perhaps in all his breed. (In the Afrikaans version the following is added: "en miskien, wie weet, oral" = "and maybe, who knows, ev-

erywhere”). With the lies of stories – all the lies, all the stories – we shape ourselves the way the first person was shaped from the dust of the earth. *That* is our first and ultimate dust. Who knows, if we understood what was happening to us, we might not have needed stories in the first place. We fabricate yesterdays for ourselves which we can live with, which make the future possible, even if it remains infinitely variable and vulnerable, a whole bloody network of flickerings, an intimate lightning to illuminate the darkness inside. And what lies at the root of it all is not this one's crime or that one's sin, but the involvement of a whole community. And now, I too, have been drawn into it. (In Afrikaans the word “aandadig” is used – a much stronger word than to be merely drawn into something, suggesting that he actively took part.)

How fucking precarious it all was. For them. Above all, for myself. (287)

In this novel, as is illustrated by the passage above, the emphasis falls on stories, on the dependence of identity on narratives (for the individual as well as for the community). The motto, “The universe is made of stories, not of atoms”, also indicates that the novel should be read as a “story book”, not only because it is a compendium of fantastic stories, but also because the novel probes into the importance of narratives as a means of understanding the world. This emphasis on the importance of narratives could be ascribed to a romantic whim of Brink (it is also evident in most of his other novels), but he also writes extensively about the importance of narratives in his latest theoretical work, *The Novel* (1998). After discussing the 20<sup>th</sup> century language philosophy he comes to the following conclusion:

the acknowledgement that we perceive ourselves, our lives, as narrative, as story, a perception that derives, among other things, from our discovery of a language-shaped world, that is, a world shaped 'like' language, a world shaped 'by' or 'through' language – and most pertinently by and through language ordered as narrative. (Brink, 1998b:14)

There has been a rapidly growing interest in the role of narratives in the human sciences during the past three decades (see Ricoeur, 1984; MacIntyre, 1997; White, 1980; Gergen, 1999; Polkinghorne, 1988 and for an overview Kreiswirth, 1992; and Hinchman & Hinchman, 1997).

A considerable number of issues concerning narratives could be pursued with the quoted passage from *Devil's Valley* as point of departure. For the purpose of this article, however, my argument will be structured around two issues only:

- ◆ In the first place I will focus on the idea of *narrative identity*, on the relationship between identity and narratives: that narratives are our “first and ultimate dust”; that we “shape ourselves” with “the lies of stories” and that we need stories because we have no other way of understanding ourselves. It is clear from the citation that not only *personal* identity is “fabricated” to “illuminate the darkness inside”, but that this fabrication of identity also pertains to a *whole community*.

- ◆ Secondly I will argue that narratives also determine *moral identity*. Our stories about the past (history) are the most important narratives in this regard: the yesterdays “which we can live with”, that “we fabricate for ourselves”, “which make the future possible”.
- ◆ In the light of these two issues I will reflect in the third place on what has been described as the “almost obsessive involvement” with the past in Afrikaans literature (Van Coller, 1997:11).

## 2. Story and identity

The acknowledgement that stories are our “first and ultimate dust”, that we need narratives in order to understand ourselves, to form an idea of our own identity, has wide currency in psychology and philosophy. Kenneth Gergen (1999:9) writes that identity is a “discursive achievement”. To be identified as a specific person (with a name, say Hansie), to be the object of certain attributes (e.g. honesty), and to refer to oneself by saying “I say” or “I was there”, mean that one is realised in language. According to Gergen it is largely through discourse that we get the feeling of an individual self, and a specific kind of discourse, the narrative, plays the most important role in forming an identity.

Alisdair MacIntyre goes even further when he states that we can only understand human actions by referring to stories, because “we all live out narratives in our lives”:

It is because we all live out narratives in our lives, and because we understand our own lives in terms of the narratives we live out, that the form of narrative is appropriate for understanding the actions of others. Stories are lived before they are told – except in the case of fiction. (MacIntyre, 1997:249)

MacIntyre argues that personal identity cannot be understood as series of events and psychological discontinuities. Personal identity runs through from birth to death and the significance of any event or psychological identity (the teenager, the middle-aged person, etc.) can only be understood against the background of a continuous narrative in which the same person, the same “I”, is the main character. Even if I am now a completely different person from the one I was ten years ago, this change is also only intelligible against the background of “my narrative”.

According to MacIntyre the only way to reconcile the two aspects of identity – the idea that identity is a matter of all or nothing (either I am the person who won the lotto or I am not), and the idea that a person can change throughout his/her lifetime, can become a different person – is by means of a narrative. Personal identity is simply not possible without a narrative.

On the one hand I am the subject of my own story, which runs from birth to death. If my narrative becomes unintelligible to myself, I experi-

ence that life has become meaningless. I need the unity of a story to render my life meaningful:

Thus personal identity is just that identity presupposed by the unity of character which the unity of narrative requires. Without such unity there would be no subjects of whom stories could be told. (MacIntyre, 1997:256)

On the other hand I am also involved in other people's narratives. Others are part of my story and I am part of their stories, with the result that we can compare stories – it brings about a kind of “accountability of the self” with the result that personal identity cannot be arrived at independently or in isolation from narratives (MacIntyre, 1997:256).

Flip Lochner states that we “shape ourselves” (i.e. we gain our identity) by means of “the lies of stories”. He came to the valley in search of facts, in search of the truth, and is met only by stories and “facts” often does not make sense (like the whale skeleton in the valley). Lochner initially draws a sharp distinction between “the lies of stories” and “facts” but eventually has to reconsider his position and is confronted by his inability to reconcile “reality” and “stories” (270).

This view of stories as lies, as innovation, can be seen in a positive light. Paul Ricoeur (1990:158) for example, stresses the human ability to be creative and to “discover” and “invent” (the world and oneself) by narrating – to discover meaning by inventing plots. But there could also be a negative side to the perception of stories as lies, something that makes that view “precarious”, as Lochner says. The implication of stories' being lies is that there is some kind of truth that is beyond our grasp. We are therefore doomed to live a lie: the lie of the narrative. This view echoes the work of Foucault, White and Mink, amongst others, who regard narratives as structures that are forced onto something that does not have an inherent narrative structure. Stories are violence that we do to reality, according to these arguments. Historians like White and Mink view narratives as second order activities, the enforcement of a narrative order, with beginnings, middles and ends in which some events are selected and structured according to specific narratological and rhetorical procedures in order to reach a particular goal. By selecting any event for a specific narrative, significance is forced onto that event. This is a process that White (1980) is suspicious about and would like to avoid. Foucault (1980) focuses on the power relations that are involved in the construction and maintenance of a specific narrative. Why is one lie preferred to another in specific circumstances, etc. and how is it upheld within a community?

To a large extent both above-mentioned approaches to the world as stories are found in *Devil's Valley*. On the one hand Flip discovers meaning in his own life as he invents a new story, a new role for himself.

Emma remarks, after he has recounted his history to her, that what he has just told her, is in its turn “his stories” (“Dis nou weer *jou* stories”, 287/“So these are *your* stories”, 278) – implying that it could also be told in a different way. On the other hand there seems to be no escape from the stories of the valley – Emma is killed and the last paragraph of the novel suggests that Lochner cannot escape from this ‘valley of stories’.<sup>2</sup>

The important question is: If stories are the substance of our identity, and these stories are all lies, how can we rely on that identity?

David Carr (1997) underwrites the important link between personal identity and narrative. He emphasises that it is wrong to divorce one’s life story from reality in the way that Mink, White, Foucault or Deleuze do. For Carr there is no discontinuity between narrative and reality, with the result that the narrative cannot be seen as some kind of power that is enforced on reality. His argument revolves around the idea that we do not experience life in the first place and then reflect upon it. We do not act and experience and then look back on those actions and events and attribute, with the advantage of hindsight, significance to those (chaotic or meaningless) events or actions.

When a story is narrated, it is usually done from the point of view of the end. The narrator knows where the story ends and can select and structure events in order to be relevant to this end. When we regard our own lives as narratives, we do not have the advantage of hindsight to select and structure events and our actions according to the valued end of our lives. We are restricted to the present. Carr argues that this “present perspective” gives us access to the past as well as the future. We are always planning for the future and reviewing the past. Therefore we are always, in the light of our future plans and our past experience, busy selecting certain sensory data and ignoring other information. In this sense we are always narrating our own lives (selecting and structuring information), not only after actions and events, but also while we are acting and experiencing. My actions are the result of my plans for the future and my story of my past experience. I do not narrate my actions afterwards when I reflect on the day’s events with a beer in my hand. My actions and experiences are forever the product of my story. Carr admits that the narration creates something, that it generates meaning rather than merely reflects mimetically, but this does not imply that the narrative exists separately from those actions and events – it has a direct influence on my actions, it is part of my life:

Narration, nevertheless intertwined as it is with action, does this in the course of life itself – not merely after the fact, at the hands of authors, in the pages of books. (Carr, 1997:17)

The implication of this argument is that the narrative activity is already taking place before it becomes cognitive or aesthetic in the form of his-

tory or fiction. For Carr (1997:17) it follows that narration not only evokes acts and experiences but also the self that narrates. My identity depends on the story that I choose and live out.

Flip Lochner learns that there is no stronger, more original or superior way to understand the world or ourselves. He realises that stories are our “first and ultimate dust” and that if we could understand in any other way, “we might not have needed stories in the first place”.

If a distinction between story and “the world” could be made, and if we accept then that the narrative follows on experience and actions, that they are not intertwined, that the narrative is forced on reality, it could be asked what the character of this reality would be. What would a world without any “false” narratives look like? We could conclude with MacIntyre (1997:254) that humans are essentially “story-telling animals”, and that we not only narrate stories but are also the product of both the stories we tell and the stories that have been told. In this regard the Bible plays an important role in *Devil's Valley*. The Bible stories – especially selected stories from the Old Testament – determine the way the community in the valley narrates their history as well as the way they perceive themselves. They are, in fact, the creation of the stories they narrate, based on the Old Testament stories they know.

This raises another important issue. It is not only an individual's personal identity that depends on his/her individual story. Lochner realises that our stories are not just “an intimate lightning to illuminate the darkness inside” the self, but that the whole community is involved.

MacIntyre (1997:254) stresses that we always find ourselves part of a story or stories. Our personal narratives are always intertwined with others' narratives. I cannot simply narrate my own story without the influence of other stories on mine and without influencing the stories of others. When we enter human society, we are already born into certain roles – and have to learn what they are:

For the story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity. I am born with a past; and to try to cut myself off from that past, in the individualist mode, is to deform my present relationships. The possession of an historical identity and the possession of a social identity coincide. Notice that rebellion against my identity is always one possible mode of expressing it. (MacIntyre, 1997:259)

Carr also points out that in the same manner that I tell and live (or live and tell) my own story, I also often live and tell a story in the plural form – *our* story. Every individual also takes part in experiences and actions where he/she is not the subject, but part of a group and the actions or experiences are not only yours or mine, but ours.

To inhabit a territory, to organise politically and economically for its cultivation and civilisation, to experience a natural or human threat and rise to meet it – these are experiences and actions usually not properly attribut-

able to me alone, or to me, you and the others individually. They belong rather to us: it is not my experience but *ours*, not I who act but *we* who act in concert. (Carr, 1997:18)

In the same way that an individual finds meaning in the present situation as a result of his/her experience of the past (already a storied past – i.e. meaningful events have been selected and ordered in a specific way) and expectations of the future (planned projects, taking steps to reach a goal, etc.), a group, a collective “we”, also derive meaning in the present from sharing both an understanding of their past (as the same story told) and a shared “project”/goal.

*We* have an experience in common when *we* grasp a sequence of events as a temporal configuration such that its present phase derives its significance from its relation to a common past and future (Carr, 1997:19).

Just as an individual is experiencing and acting while narrating, a collective story is also experienced and narrated by an “us”. There is often a division of work in the group – one person narrates while others listen – but the narrative is experienced as truly “ours”.

(In this regard one can refer to the “Boetman-is-die-bliksem-in” debate in Afrikaans newspapers during 2000. Judged by the reaction in *Beeld*'s letter column, Chris Louw's narrative about national service was a story shared by many national servicemen of the Apartheid years.)

But groups of a very special and socially and historically important sort are constituted when individuals regard each other in just such a way that they use the *we* in describing what is happening to them, what they are doing, and who they are. This is, of course, the sort of group for which the word “community” is reserved. (Carr, 1997:19-20)

The community of Devil's Valley had at one stage shared a story of the past and a vision for the future. Individuals in the valley derived their personal identity from that shared story (based on the Bible and some old myths). It seems as if at one stage there was (and at first, upon Flip's arrival in the valley, this is apparently still the case) a single story that constituted the past of the community, a sort of “founding myth” that all agreed to as “our story”. The community also shows a certain shared expectation of the future, they share a responsibility given to them by God, they regard themselves as a group selected by God for a specific purpose – to stay pure and live in the way God intended. This shared past and future destiny come under pressure from outside the community (the severe drought) as well as from the inside (individuals start questioning the stories and insist on narrating their own versions to Lochner).

### 3. Stories / history and moral identity

Kenneth Gergen (2000:12) argues that narratives about the self not only provide/ create identity, but that these narratives are also used within daily life as a means of creating and sustaining value. He states that it is

especially the stories about the past which are important to generate values. This value-generating function of stories about the self is linked to what Gergen calls “moral identity”: “one’s definition as a worthy and acceptable individual by the standards inhering in one’s relationships”. The stories of the past that a community agrees upon, form and sustain values within that community.

Through these stories about the past, cultural traditions are established. By selecting specific events from the past and bestowing value and honour upon them, traditions are imbued with significance and the maintenance of these traditions is simultaneously justified. As Gergen (2000:14) puts it: the stories about a community’s past “can be valuable constituents of long-standing cultural traditions, serving to demarcate (construct) a particular tradition, to invest it with honour, and to articulate a rationale for its future”.

In other words: a community recounts stories about its honourable past, e.g. we fought bravely against an overpowering enemy, we survived terrible conditions, we brought order within chaos. A moral identity is created, as the moral of these tales is that a good member of the community should do likewise. Historical narratives serve to provide a community with moral identity.

According to MacIntyre (1997) a moral identity cannot be formed on one’s own, it is not something individual, because the individual has a social inheritance. I am always the son of somebody, the brother or uncle of someone, I belong to a class, a race, a group, and I live in a specific area. What is morally good for me is good for a person in these circumstances. That is why I inherit from my family, class, group or race a certain debt and responsibilities.

Just before Flip Lochner’s reflection on stories, the old seer tells him:

Look man, there’s nothing one can do about tomorrow. It comes as it must. All you can do something about is yesterday. But the problem with yesterday is it never stays down, you got to keep stamping on it (286-287).

The past has to be re-examined continuously. When the stories about the past stagnate, like the stories of the community in *Devil’s Valley*, they can no longer provide valid answers to questions about morality. The severe drought causes a great deal of suffering in the valley and although there is an ample source of water, nobody touches it as a result of an outdated story about the past. *Devil’s Valley* contains, on the one hand, this kind of story that restricts possibilities and, on the other hand, the restriction of the possibility of telling new stories: anything that is regarded as ‘strange’ is banned (the only myths allowed are the Bible and some Khoi stories). In this way new possibilities for identity, and of a different moral identity are limited. The absence of birds in the valley alludes to this absence of creative freedom – underwritten by Ricoeur’s idea that we can only dis-

cover by inventing, that telling stories is a process of discovery through invention.

It is clear that *Devil's Valley* could be read as an allegory for the South African, and specifically the Afrikaner history; for example, the total seclusion brought about by apartheid and the resulting restricted ways of thinking – based on some 17<sup>th</sup> century ideas. To a large extent these stories, a specific interpretation of the Bible, served to inform the Afrikaner's moral identity. The story about the Afrikaner's past, for example, has often been narrated based on the narrative of the Jews' exodus and settlement in a Promised Land, just like the inhabitants of the valley interpret their past.

Especially during the past two or three decades this kind of interpretation of the past was no longer accepted as “our” story by all Afrikaners. Although a specific version of the past has now been rejected, there is no clarity about the past. There is no general acceptance of a single story of the past. In this situation it is interesting to look at Afrikaans literature and the “almost obsessive involvement” of Afrikaans literature with the past. This close relationship clearly shows that we cannot simply distance ourselves from the stories we are born into. The relationship between a white and a black person, even when born after 1994, will always be determined by the stories that existed before them, not merely of apartheid, but of a whole colonial history.

#### **4. Afrikaans literature and the past: forming a new moral identity**

The Seer tells Flip that “you have to keep stamping” on yesterday, that it never stays down (287). He has tried all his life (and even in his death) to keep stamping on yesterday, to keep yesterday the way he wanted it. This influence of the past on the present is presented in many other ways besides the dead old man's presence. (A ladder is placed in his open grave to make it easy for him to get out of it every day.) Flip finds for example that there are no dates on the graves; Gert Brush keeps on making new paintings but finds that the old ones keep on showing through his new paint. For too long the single story has been kept in place.

Upon Flip's arrival the hegemony of this single story is kept in place by fear. Initially everybody is scared to speak to Flip Lochner. Slowly they emerge to tell him various stories about the past. Often specific versions – those of women, for instance – are “stamped down” by the “official versions” upheld by the men. In the end Flip is left with a myriad of stories and it becomes impossible to tell the truth. (This reminds one of Lyotard's idea that in the crisis of legitimisation in which knowledge finds itself, there is incredulity towards metanarratives and we end up with local, small narratives.)

It is important to keep the interaction among various stories going in order to prevent the establishment of a single value – a situation that becomes dangerous. If a single story is allowed to establish a single moral identity, it could lead to a situation such as in Nazi Germany or apartheid. (Cf. Gergen's example of the Holocaust.)

Against this background I would like to consider a number of important Afrikaans novels published during the last decade. It is possible to make a generalised (rough) distinction between two ways in which these novels re-tell the past. The first category of novels undermines the generally accepted Afrikaner-history. Breaking away from and subverting the traditional “historical novels”, like those of F.A. Venter, novels that could be described as “historiographic metafiction” (Hutcheon, 1988:93) debunk and undermine the traditional way of narrating the Afrikaner past. According to Hutcheon (1988:93) “historiographic metafiction refutes the natural or common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction”. Etienne Leroux's *Magersfontein O, Magersfontein!* (1978) was one of the first important novels of this kind, followed by, among others, Dan Roodt's *Sonneskyn en Chevrolet* (1980) and *Suidpunt-jazz* (1998) by André Letoit. In this writing Afrikaner identity based on the “accepted”, “canonical” history is undermined and the moral identity which emerged from this “traditional” version of the past is exposed. In Marlene van Niekerk's important novel, *Triomf* (1994), the bankruptcy of the Christian National rendition of a glorious Afrikaner past is exposed. The narrative of nationalism and a specific Christian Nationalism and the result of clinging to these myths are compared to incest; it literally breeds a monster (Lambert Benade). The way that the Benades stick together can be likened to the way in which the community in Devil's Valley does not allow any “outsiders” to enter. The fact that the narrative on which Lambert Benade's identity is based, is exposed as false, and the (self) destruction this discovery leads to, show the catastrophic result of a corrupt moral identity. (For a detailed discussion, see Burger, 2000.)

In John Miles's *Kroniek uit die doofpot* (1991) an individual's narrative (chronicle) is “rescued” from oblivion (the “*doofpot*”) and told in order to expose the lies of a suppressive story. It achieved what the Truth and Reconciliation Committee aimed to do later on. The emphasis in this novel is on the effect of a single collective narrative on an individual. When an individual's narrative is no longer heard, when it lands within the jaws of a devouring monster (“tussen die kake van 'n opvreetmasjien”), a corrupt moral identity is created. This novel also exposes that we are all involved in the creation and maintenance of such a story; we are “aandadig”, as Lochner describes it in *Devil's Valley*.

In the second category of novels the emphasis is not merely on an undermining of the “official”, “accepted” versions of the past, not only an exposure of the “lies” and the consequences of this single nationalist narrative, but also on a positive search to find a new story about the past, to find a new identity. In this regard one can refer to A.H.M. Scholtz's *Vatmaar* (1995) in which the individuals' stories, the individuals' moral identity, are subjected by a moral identity that the (coloured) individual can never achieve due to skin colour. But it goes further: a new identity is created, and a new moral identity, where good is not dependent on colour but on individual humane action.

Elsa Joubert showed in her *Reise van Isobelle* (1995) that, although there is much in our history that has been romanticised and that has led to a warped moral identity, it is still possible to find different events from which to draw a new moral identity. She tries to rescue integrity from some of the events of the past in order to make a new story, a new moral identity, possible.

One of the most important authors in this regard is Karel Schoeman. In Schoeman's biographical works, such as *Merksteen* (1999), the small story, the *petite histoire* of unimportant individuals (his own grandparents), is narrated. In the process many myths about Afrikaner “heroes” (like Arnoldus Pannevis) are exposed. But it stretches further than this. The individual's story (and identity) is rescued from the overwhelming, subjugating, single group identity. Schoeman also pursues this theme in his novels. His “Voices trilogy”<sup>3</sup> is marked by the voices of unimportant individuals: an old lady, a teenage girl in love, a cripple clerk, an old dying lady, a shepherd. Narratives of individuals, struggling to find individual identity, a new moral identity. A singular version of history is made impossible. In the foreign country of the past, a country that we cannot enter readily, Schoeman is trying to find new stories, individual narratives on which a different moral identity can be based. Schoeman succeeds in doing this without, once more, conforming to a new “dominant history”.

Christoffel Coetzee's *Op soek na generaal Mannetjies Mentz* (1997) also undermines many romanticised ideas about the Anglo Boer War, but it is a novel in which the idea of a moral identity emerging from the narratives about the past is explored. No easy statements about good and bad are made.

If we create our own identity by re-telling the story of the past and by planning for the future, it is clear that the Afrikaner is in an uncertain position. There is no coherent story about the past. Stories that emerge, often do not justify the continuation of that narrative and without planning for the future it becomes impossible to interpret the current situation, to know how to act.

One thing is clear, however. There is no single coherent Afrikaner history any more, resulting in an identity crisis as far as the story for “us” is concerned. There is also no clear shared end to the “Afrikaner narrative”, shared by a large group of an “us”. In these circumstances it is important that the past is examined. It remains impossible to be free of all the narratives behind us (even though Annesu de Vos thinks it possible – and then proves the opposite by becoming involved in the Boetman debate<sup>4</sup>). The more stories we can tell about the past, the better. As more stories emerge, a new identity is formed, and a new moral identity will arise.

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## ENDNOTES

1. Pagenumbers in brackets, without reference to a date or author, refers to: Brink, André. 1998a. *Devil's Valley*. London: Vintage.
2. In the Afrikaans version Lochner's failure to escape from the valley is implied more clearly. In both versions Lochner states in the second last paragraph that he still has to get past the old man and then the last paragraph in the Afrikaans version starts with “Maar”/“But”, not with “En”/ “And” like in the English version.
3. *Verliesfontein* (1998), *Hierdie lewe* (1993) and *Die uur van die engel* (1995).
4. *Beeld*, 27 July 2000.

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