



A search for justice using AI-assisted image creation

by Lucy Van Sambeek



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Abstract

As artificial intelligence becomes pervasive, therapists might be left wondering about its implications for narrative practice. This paper explores an unexpected discovery about the power of artificial intelligence in re-imagining a story of injustice. Lucy (the therapist) and Miles (the client) used an AI image creator to assist in the externalisation of problems. Creating imagery representing Miles's story of injustice and sharing the images with outsider witnesses became acts of justice and healing. The process of narrative justice using AI has implications for the practice of narrative therapy. This article finishes with an opportunity for readers and viewers to respond to Miles's online gallery of imagery.

Key words: *artificial intelligence; AI; justice-seeking; aphantasia; anxiety; outsider witness; art; imagery; narrative practice*

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A meeting with Mr Black

Miles was referred to me by the clinician leading the 2019 bushfire recovery in our local area, a beautiful valley on the Mid North Coast of New South Wales, Australia. Having lost his home and bush acreage to the fire, I anticipated that Miles might share themes of loss and grief. However, sitting around his dining table at our first meeting, it became evident that something very different was bothering him. Miles was on stress leave from his job as a bus driver. He proceeded to share how he had been falsely accused of wasting time on his bus shifts and creating fraudulent overtime records. I sensed great despair and anger at the unfairness of it all. Miles described how surprised he felt about having been able to get on with life after the bushfire yet being completely derailed by this accusation. In this meeting, I also heard about Miles's past love of pottery making and his current passion for home renovating. Miles shared his interest in op shopping – searching charity or thrift shops to find unique items that he creatively upcycled for his new town-based home.

Ever since a disciplinary meeting at work, Miles had been experiencing anxiety, which he personified as Mr Black. Mr Black interfered with Miles's sense of safety in his home and in his body, hijacking his attempts to get on with his life. Everyday tasks would be full of errors like saucepans in the fridge and milk in the cupboard. On some days, artistic creativity, problem-solving and home renovation tasks were totally impossible. Miles described Mr Black as splitting him in two, with one part of him immobilised and unable to get out of bed. Miles felt like he was watching himself talking to me. His daily cycling pilgrimages were no longer pleasurable, and he was unable to remember any of the sights, smells or sounds after taking to the road on thin rubber tyres.

This was at the beginning of a very long and drawn-out workers' compensation and personal injury claim. In addition, some months prior to the workplace incident, a neighbour had subjected Miles to verbal abuse and a violent home invasion and robbery. He really loved his new home and was trying to settle in, but this invasive act had dramatically impacted Miles's peace and recovery.

A story of injustice

Miles worked through feelings of frustration and anger; however, the longer the workers' compensation case dragged on, leaving him in limbo, the more Miles began to speak of injustice and a feeling of being stuck, unable to move forward with his life. The lack of timely action by the police to respond to the neighbours' actions further added to Miles's experience of unfairness. Injustice trauma is a form of psychological distress. It arises out of experiences of unjust and unfair treatment in which people are mistreated, judged, humiliated or blamed. Informed by the narrative principle of attending to what is "absent but implicit" (Carey, Walther, & Russell, 2009), I was curious about what was so important to Miles that he would have such a profound objection to the way his employer treated him. Miles reflected that being falsely accused of indiscretions at work violated precious ethics and values that he stood for – things like integrity, common sense and intelligence.

Some months later, Miles started to report symptoms of aphantasia: the inability to see pictures in one's mind. He was usually very attuned to imagery, so its absence was causing a lot of distress. Around this time, Miles learnt that he was not going to be told what evidence, if any, substantiated the false accusations made at the disciplinary meeting. Over the course of a few months, Miles started to feel that his imagination and mind's eye were trying to "rewire" themselves. He still couldn't see images in his mind, but he could describe images using words.

Miles had almost given up hope that any form of legal justice was possible. I started wondering whether a different form of justice might be available to Miles through sharing his story with others, perhaps by writing about his experience. Denborough (2013) suggested possibilities for people to experience "narrative justice" through a process of naming injustices and their effects, exploring ideals and values that have not been violated despite the injustice, and convening forums for sharing stories with a view to making a contribution to the lives of others. Denborough (2013) suggested that where legal forms of justice are out of reach, bringing narrative justice to the lives of the people we work with is a therapist's responsibility. Honouring the feelings, thoughts and know-how of those who have experienced injustice can bring healing and justice by contributing to making a more socially just world for others (Denborough 2013).

In my explorations with Miles, we also grappled with the idea of finding peace through acts of forgiveness. Therapists are sometimes cautioned against putting clients who have been harmed in a position that requires them to forgive (Reynolds & Sanders-Kay, 2023). Reynolds (in Reynolds & Sanders-Kay, 2023), has suggested that letting the oppressor off the hook – without apology, accountability and repair – means we miss an opportunity to transform society and ensure the same indiscretion doesn't reoccur. However, Gollan (2002) has spoken about the freedom and lightness that can come from forgiveness, while continuing the work to hold oppressors accountable. In raising the concept of forgiveness with Miles, my intention was to see whether it might offer him relief from the stuck feelings of injustice and anger that continued to plague him, given his belief that the legal fight was unlikely to achieve any satisfactory result and that no apology was forthcoming.

Miles reflected on how much easier it was to forgive nature for burning his house down than it was to forgive his bosses for their indiscretions. Amusingly, he imagined paying for a full-page advert in the newspaper listing all the things he was forgiving the bus company for. He also entertained the idea of designing a poster with his declaration of forgiveness to paste up in his lounge room window so passers-by could view it from the street. These ideas seemed to reflect Miles's intention to not let his employers remain unaccountable for their treatment of him.

An unexpected externalising medium

One day, as Miles was sitting in the pit of injustice, which he continued to sink into whenever Mr Black showed up, I invited Miles to express his feelings in a painting or drawing. When clients are open to the idea, I sometimes introduce art expression as a way of externalising problems. I have observed that this process can sometimes offer clients a different perspective on the problem. The power of using imagery for the externalisation of problems and visual rich story development has been explored extensively by Denborough (2018, pp. 87–97). In this case, I was keen to make use of the urge for creativity, which appeared to be returning to Miles. I also wondered whether image creation might strengthen Miles's sense of his mind's eye. Miles expressed a yearning to rest,

restore and redecorate using his “imagination of solid colour”, knowing that Mr Black was causing him to overthink things. Miles laughed at the thought of taking a spray can to the side of a bus, but was happy to consider using a chalkboard drawing as a medium for externalising injustice. He said he would make his chalk image before our next session.

In a follow-up email, I suggested that Miles get out his drawing and painting materials when he noticed Mr Black coming back. Art in therapy is very different to art creation in other contexts, so as an artist himself, it was important for Miles to know that the process of expressing himself was more important than the outcome of producing some kind of masterpiece. I invited Miles to let go of any preconceived ideas about what might come out on the paper or how he wanted it to turn out. I suggested he try tuning into his body, feeling a sense of groundedness in the moment, perhaps tuning into his breath or his feet on the floor, and then to paint as if his heart or gut were holding the brush. If he noticed his “head brain” trying to take over, I wondered if he could let those thoughts go and give permission for the heart or gut brain to express itself. Miles couldn't wait to get started, and he went off with his newly modified mind's eye already working overtime dreaming in words of colour, shape and form.

To my surprise, Miles presented at our next session as happy as a dog with a new bone and with a big grin on his face. His creativity had sparked a burst of energy and productivity in his home renovations, and he felt as if all the pressure had lifted. Instead of a chalk painting, he shared with me a series of striking images he had produced using AI. Hardly able to contain himself, Miles reflected on his satisfaction at having offloaded things from his brain, heart and gut into an AI image creator. It appeared that the process of “visual narrativity” offered Miles an experience of “aliveness that displaces a sense of emptiness and deadness” (White, 2011, p. 128).

Transforming thoughts, feelings and sensations into images

Miles reflected on the process and the effects of working with AI.

Being of a technical mindset, I found AI very interesting. I came across it by accident in a news story. You simply add the elements.

It works best when you're highly descriptive, so I got creative and added details like adjectives, locations and even artistic styles such as "digital art" and "photo-realistic".

I was initially using AI to create all kinds of images such as bizarre real estate, animals riding bicycles and morphing items. Then I realised I could tell a story using the trauma of false accusations in the workplace as an example. I thought this might also assist with the art therapy task Lucy had invited me to consider. After researching art therapy, I thought it could be rather slow, and I really wanted to get images out quickly. For me, the creation of one or two images with old-school techniques would somehow not work. I was starting to suffer from blank canvas syndrome. I needed a way to get up and running quickly. I was interested in creating a series of images that told a story – my story being that of a bus journey to hell and back. I took on the task of learning how to get the best out of an AI image creator by learning how to formulate the best prompt for the best image. What I learnt during this process was that the AI often thinks outside of the square and so do I.

What I noticed was that while I was working with an outside-the-square machine thinking pattern, it also expanded my own outside-the-square thinking. Like a marketing collective attempting to brainstorm a new advert for a new product, where new ideas create more new ideas, the final results were a long way from the starting point. Brainstorming with the AI resulted in a great solution.

The satisfaction of externalising a thought into an image was a form of mental off-loading. Now, when I think back to most aspects of the saga, I experience most thoughts as the images themselves: as external entities posted elsewhere and not solely in my headspace anymore. This was a goal achieved, a similar effect to writing down a traumatic event. This externalisation has meant that the issues are not in my head all the time. Or if certain issues are, the intensity is less and therefore it is less disruptive to my reality at the time.

I would manipulate the AI image–creator prompt to get an image like that I was thinking of or, importantly, wanted to see in the real world. An image of an externalised thought! At the time, I was becoming more aware of the three brains (an idea introduced by Lucy that comes from leading-edge neuroscience research on the collaborative workings of the enteric, cardiac and cephalic brains), so I paid special attention to gut, heart and head feelings about the saga. I tried to get an image that reflected those feelings, emotions and thoughts as best as I could. I needed to be 100% happy with each image, and my response had to be "Hey, that really does reflect the experience!"

I then tested some of these images on friends to see what their comments would be. All the images had to include an orange bus as this reflected the company I worked for. Other elements I included were a cross for suffering, a court hammer for injustice and blue shirts to reflect bus drivers. I am very visual and see a lot of things visually. Having lost my mind's eye during this saga, I was aware that my brain had somehow rewired this side of things. Now, while I do not see the result in my mind's eye, I know the outcome somehow.



Figure 1. AI-generated image: "Systemic sacrifice and endless power games no matter what the loss"

Transforming injustice

I must admit that my initial reaction at seeing Miles's AI-generated images was one of shock and disgust as grotesque body parts featured alongside a fiery hell of headless humans and crucifixes. Staying decentred and curious, I discovered that for Miles, "something crap" had been "turned into something good". He had no feelings about seeing the "bloody awesome images" on the screen in front of him. Something had shifted, and I sensed Mr Black was backing off. When asked whether creating these images felt like an act of justice, Miles replied, "I can see that in the picture now". "The very act of giving expression to the struggles of life is an example of taking action, of responding in some way" (Carey, Walther, & Russell, 2009, p. 322). Through the lens of what is "absent but implicit", Miles's images of fiery grotesqueness can also be recognised as representing the values he stands for in life, despite these standing in contrast to the violence of the images. The creation of these images felt like an act of justice to Miles.

Over a number of weeks, Miles continued to create images based on a series of words that came to him. I did wonder whether aspects of this process might be retraumatising and whether they might give Mr Black an excuse to stick around, so I invited Miles to step back and take a rest if needed. However, he continued to report feeling relief and excitement at finding another outlet for his creativity. I also noticed that over the time of our consultations, the content of imagery was shifting, and more peaceful objects such as rose petals, white doves and blue hearts were making an appearance. I believe this reflected Miles's intention to move in a preferred direction, which involved a sense of peace for himself. Michael White (2007) spoke of the power of externalising processes through which people identify their moral stance and take action for themselves to redress the injustices they face. For Miles, AI had become an accessible tool for externalising and transforming injustice.



Figure 2. AI-generated image: "Nature and standing by your beliefs: Truth helps one to move forwards"

When I look at that picture, travelling down the road is like a journey of recovery. The rose petals are like a cushion. It's a kind of safe place that you want to be in, like your bed, like cuddling your favourite friend. The road is full of sharp glass. There's flames. It's fiery and hell, but then eventually as you travel that journey, you notice the sun in the distance, the seedlings start to come up and the birds start tweeting. Through the healing, the road becomes more of a nice place.

Witnesses to acts of justice-seeking

Alongside an increased uptake of home renovation and artistic projects, the therapeutic art-creation process appeared to ease Miles's sense of injustice in the world, giving him agency over his experience and the telling of his story in a creative form. We entertained the possibility of exhibiting these images through an online or local gallery to access a larger audience of outsider witnesses to Miles's visual narrative. I wondered whether this might thicken the story of the creation of AI imagery as an act of justice-seeking. Although traditionally in narrative therapy, outsider witnesses are invited into the therapy room to provide responses to a story in real time (Carey & Russell, 2003), most of my experience with the process has involved creating therapeutic documents to share

with outsider witnesses, and inviting their responses through a written message or letter, something Michael White (2007) did in his early work. Miles wrote:

My primary objective in sharing this traumatic experience with others, via an artistic visual format, would be an attempt to create a mindful and emotional connection with the viewer. It becomes a connection where I tell my story, and where the viewer's awareness is focused on what was going on in my head, my heart and my gut at various times of this saga.

When false accusations and lies are made by others, and negatively affect or impact on the innocent, the journey can often be long and tortuous. Sharing my trauma experience with others is a catalyst to help me further try to make sense of a truly senseless event. It is a natural human reaction to try to make sense of such an experience; a process that can be the most difficult in one's life, where challenges are endless. Where the injustice and unfairness are so great as to skew one's normal mind and bodily processes and reactions constantly.

When one has been accused of actions one did not commit, it creates a hideous wall of injustice. A wall so high, it is hard sometimes to see a way over it. It is the sharing of this story with others that is important for me, to assist with my recovery and be able to get over that wall. Important for others also, so as to:

- doubt/disbelieve those accusations were ever performed
- feel/understand some of the same emotions
- try to make sense of the injustice.

My story also allows you as a witness to become more aware of others' challenges and injustices. We do not live in a necessarily fair world sometimes, and it could, at some time, affect us all.

For me, the production of these visual artistic creations has created an externalisation of some of my thoughts and emotions. I hope you are able to connect with these.

I stand next to you, as you see, think, feel, wonder, question, realise and connect with my artwork. Let us both share the journey.

Inviting narrative practitioners to witness the power of AI

In my work, I have noticed how the outsider-witness process can be a powerful tool to give voice to the private concerns of individuals in the political space, therefore reducing the isolating and individualising effects of problems and increasing people's sense of community through contributions to others' lives. In Miles's case, I was also guided by Denborough's (2013) suggestion that sharing stories of injustice can contribute to both healing and justice. I wondered whether other narrative practitioners might be a suitable audience for Miles's images, and whether they also were using AI in their work. I wondered what effects responses from narrative practitioners as outsider witnesses might have on Miles. When I shared my wonderings with Miles, he was buoyed by the idea that other therapists might use AI image creator in their work to assist others who felt a sense of helplessness about unfair or unjust actions in their lives. With his agreement, I shared some images accompanied by a short summary of his story in a Facebook group of narrative therapists, prefacing the post with a warning that the images might distress or offend some viewers. I kept the invitation for feedback open rather than post the usual outsider-witness questions, stating: "my client is keen to know what responses these images evoke for people". In my next session with Miles, I shared the responses that I felt Miles would connect with including:

I am particularly struck by the sense of anguish and violation of being publicly subjected to others' scrutiny and accusation – the internal representations of fire in the mind and depths of bowels. It has me thinking of the feeling of powerlessness when not having a voice, or having to justify or disprove what has been suggested. Feeling the rage of injustice and painfully alone in the world, swept off with all the other stereotypes and assumptions of what people are like. Narrow and shallow spoiled identities. Ugh. Powerful images (anonymous)

I am struck by the fierce intensity of the images. I am also struck by the many images of people with no faces. I wonder if this facelessness reflects something important in his experience? (Jacob Mosgaard)

Miles reflected on the impact of his visual narrative and the idea of making a contribution to the practice of narrative therapy.

When I initially mentioned to Lucy that I would be interested in feedback from viewers of the artistic creations, I did not give it any more thought at the time. I didn't think about how the feedback would affect me, or even what I wanted to hear. So when Lucy shared these messages, to be honest I was gobsmacked.

What I did hear seemed to be a confirmation for me at many levels. It confirmed that the AI art therapy exercise had indeed portrayed many of the aspects I wanted it to, and further involved the viewer in aspects of the journey:

- portraying the saga, the injustice, the insidious actions by management, the personal suffering, the frustration, the anger, the lack of any credible evidence
- creating emotions within the viewer
- for me, developing a sense of connection with the viewer
- knowing I am not alone anymore on this journey
- feeling a sense of positive feelings as to how this AI-driven art therapy has many possibilities to help others.

I remember there was a great sense of relief and happiness, feelings that had not been around for some time. It was like, as others say, “a drug flowing through the veins”, for other people now could see and feel my journey through my images. I wanted to meet these viewers, to simply say, “thank you, you don't know how happy that comment has made me feel”.

I feel I am at a point where soon the story will be out there. Where others will be able to feel the injustice and understand my journey. Like a bushfire, one is completely stripped of all connections to everything during the time of fight and flight. *Nothing* matters at all except for saving the self.

It is worth mentioning that Miles had sat in the role of outsider witness in our earlier work together, providing a written response in the form of a letter to another client of mine who shared her story of redefining her relationship with anxiety. Through this process, Miles had received a return message from the author, and experienced the powerful effect that witnessing others' stories can provide. Miles's testimony reflects the power of definitional ceremonies providing “an antidote to the

effects of isolation ... and to the sense of invisibility” that can follow an experience of isolation (White, 2007, p. 181).



Figure 3. AI-generated image: “The art surgeon extracts the bus saga—diseased mind and implants the same on to a canvas, for all to see the truth”

The wider cultural context of injustice

Externalising practices aim to expose the dominant systems and social structures that subjugate people we work with and make them feel powerless (White, 2016). For Miles, the dominant systems included the many cogs and wheels he had to negotiate in the workers' compensation system and the demands of lawyers attempting to “prove” that his employer had caused injury through its treatment of him. After meeting with myriad health professionals including doctors, psychiatrists and psychologists in order to meet the threshold of psychological injury required, Miles began to expose this powerful social culture which continued to perpetuate feelings of injustice. “We do not live in a necessarily fair world sometimes, and it could, at some time, affect us all”, he said. I watched as he stood up in protest against this system, only responding to their emails in a time that suited him, cutting back on the number of doctors' appointments he attended and refusing to go back to the psychologist who he deemed not to be helping him recover.

Throughout our work together, I witnessed Miles hovering between the struggle with Mr Black showing

up and hijacking his life, and standing strongly against the politics of injustice that contributed to Mr Black's presence. In exploring the dominant discourses or ideas that contributed to his experience of injustice I asked:

- Where are you feeling this sense of injustice? Have power and gender played a role here?
- How have dominant ideas from the patriarchal system contributed to the situation that you have found yourself in and the treatment towards you at work?
- Did you notice a difference between the way female and male managers would operate?
- What conditions create the opportunity for men to use bullying behaviour?

Miles reflected:

When males show emotions, it is commonly seen by default as a sign of weakness by other males. It's all absolute nonsense.

There was never any feeling or humanity shown by male managers. They were just bullies ... Their power is to negate. I knew it was a bully-boy place the minute I walked into the tearoom. In the old days, they might initiate people like that: take them out the back of the shed for a good bashing.

It's the culture that they are in. The manager has to prove himself, that he is strong and he can keep control of the bus drivers. Give them the flick if they did something wrong, even if it means throwing 80 years of experience out the door, so he can prove himself and go up the ladder.

We reflected together on the gender pay gap and demanding equal pay as a way of challenging and changing the dominant culture. This fight for justice is still being played out. Because Miles stands so strongly in protest against the political systems of patriarchy and power, he doesn't want to let his employer off the hook. This influenced his decision to pursue personal injury compensation as an act of justice-seeking acknowledgment of harm caused and attempting to change a system.

A man with a small brain is a man with a small brain, but it doesn't give him the right to incinerate someone. We know that's not right. Sometimes I think I should let it go. But it just makes your blood boil. How much unfairness should we allow? There's principles. It comes

back to making the world a better place. If I just let it go for my own personal gain, the next person suffers injustice in the system.

Miles went on to share values around equity and his belief in fighting injustices in other parts of society "in order to create some kind of power to keep things in order".



Figure 4. AI-generated image: "Driver sacrifice only reduces the main asset – no drivers, no bus runs"

To the viewer, some of Miles's images might also be seen to reflect themes of gender, patriarchy and power.

Transforming narrative practice

I have been struck by the potential for AI to be a positive force after witnessing the impact that this process had on Miles's mood and outlook. Until Miles presented his images to me, I did not believe any good could come from this technology. Although there are concerns about AI, including its use to replace therapists, I was left wondering how we might lean into the technology to enhance our clients' experiences in therapy. Might it benefit clients who struggle to tell their story in words or who feel they cannot draw or paint? Might it offer a new perspective on problems and an alternative way for a person to tell their story? Is it necessary to include text with images when inviting outsider witnesses to respond? Denborough (2018) stated that visuals alone have limitations in telling an alternative story, and I agree. Without text, the outsider witness might interpret a visual story in

many different ways. Yet this underestimates the power of the transportation of the outsider witness through emotional, sensory and felt experience. Initially, Miles simply wished for his story to create an emotional reaction, and whether witnesses knew his story or not didn't matter to him. Miles said the way the audience connected was like "a drug flowing through the veins". In this case, the "processes of immersivity, interactivity and virtual involvement" (Denborough, 2018, p. 95) worked together with striking images to achieve a strong emotional resonance with the audience. Miles has since decided to include more of his story in an online gallery of both images and text.

Discussing other AI affordances that Microsoft Bing offers, such as the textual chat (AI chatbot) and search features, Miles has shared how communicating with the AI chatbot was more satisfying than talking to a "typical psychologist": "You don't get anything back, they just listen, but AI gives me feedback and it picks up your mood", he said. Miles reflected on being in a completely different place, by thinking outside the square and creating weird things visually outside of his head: a place that had been largely occupied by Mr Black. With the sudden onset of AI image-generation technology, we are certainly heading into interesting times.

A collaborative discovery

I'd like to acknowledge that engaging AI to assist in externalising injustice was entirely Miles's initiative. It sits alongside the many other skills and knowledges Miles employed in directing his own journey of recovery. As White (2007, p. 76) wrote, people are always "drawing from a stock of maps relevant to journeys already taken and ... they know a lot about mapmaking". Miles brought with him a big basket of maps and myriad storylines about ways he had found relief from the effects of Mr Black. He was dedicated to the practice of meditation and mindfulness to get through moments of discomfort. His research skills meant that he knew more about the effects of trauma on the brain and the side effects of medication than his doctor did.

My contribution to the therapeutic process included remaining decentred but influential, staying curious about Miles's interest in creative and artistic expression and how this could be utilised in a process of externalisation.

Conclusion

This article set out to demonstrate the effects of creating a visual externalisation of a problem using AI technology for a client who experienced a work-related traumatic incident that violated his values and ethics. As someone who had used visualisation in other creative parts of his life but had temporarily lost his "mind's eye", the process of feeding descriptive words into an AI image creator allowed Miles to express in imagery what his heart, gut and head were thinking and feeling. AI may be a useful tool to introduce to clients who already express themselves creatively through art or "outside-the-box" thinking, those who do not feel they are artistic, or those who feel immobilised with feelings of injustice or unfairness. What was experienced by Miles as "a journey to hell and back" has transformed into a story of resisting injustice. I would argue that acts of justice-seeking can be made richer when we share stories and imagery with outsider witnesses, and in this case, I hope sharing Miles's story and images might also contribute to expanding the practice of narrative therapy.

An invitation to respond

It is on this note that I invite you to respond to Miles's images. Below is a link to the full gallery and blog Miles created since the writing of this article.

The bus that whispered

We invite you to reflect and respond to these questions, if you so wish:

- What words, phrases or images about Miles's experience caught your attention in this article?
- What image did you get in your mind's eye of Miles's life and what was important to him? Might you try to recreate this image using an AI image creator using some of the tips Miles offers here and share it with us?
- What was it like creating your own AI image?
- Does the AI image you've created reflect in some way an experience or story of your own in life or work?
- What does it mean for you to have heard Miles's story and viewed his images? How might Miles's experience shape your work with people?

Responses can be sent to Lucy at
lucy@metaphoricallyspeaking.com.au or posted
in the comments on this article's landing page
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