Black Americans’ Segregation and Discrimination Reconstructed: A Study of Alex Haley’s Mama Flora’s Family

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Abstract: This article deals with black Americans’ segregation and discrimination by Whites in the United States during and after the Second World War in the American Army and in the civilian life in Alex Haley’s Mama Flora’s Family. It purports to demonstrate that despite the black Americans’ complaints about their non-consideration as full American citizens and their massive participation in the American Army to fight alongside with white American soldiers so as to defeat Germans who are supposed to be their enemies, black Americans are surprised to find out that their non-consideration remains a reality, and that Germans are not only better treated than them by white Americans, but also received and served in the places where all Blacks are prohibited to be seen and served because of the color of their skin. The author’s reconstruction of such wrong views of white Americans over their black counterparts seen as racial segregation and racial discrimination evidences the historical dimension of his novel.

Key Words: Segregation, Discrimination, Black Americans, White Americans, History, Fiction.

INTRODUCTION

I would like to start this exploration on Alex Haley’s Mama Flora’s Family by giving a brief explanation of the expressions “racial segregation” and “racial discrimination” which might seem somehow obscure to some readers. The first refers to a total and forced separation of physical things because of races. The second is linked to the fact of treating individuals or a group of people differently from the other because they do not belong to the same race. The novel is based not only on the life of a female character named Flora who embodies the whole black community because of the treatments inflicted on her by white Americans in the civilian life, but also on a male character named Willie who shows his determination to fight alongside with white American soldiers to defend the United States’ Army in spite of the presence of racial segregation and racial discrimination which all Blacks are victims of on the American soil. My main interest in this study is especially linked to what this novel owes to the black Americans’ experience of segregation and discrimination in the American Army and in the civilian life during and after the Second World War and how much this experience may have influenced the author’s imagination. I want to point to a few aspects of this work of fiction that seem to me to constitute an intertextual relationship between the author’s imagination and reality. This intertextuality is to be seen in terms of the interplay between history and fiction. Knowing that the novel’s structure is built on the black Americans’ experience of segregation and discrimination, I will begin this analysis by examining the author’s reconstruction of racial segregation in transportation and public places.

1. THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE BLACK AMERICANS’ SEGREGATION IN TRANSPORTATION AND PUBLIC PLACES

The title of this subsection is indicative, for it suggests that black Americans are segregated by their white counterparts in the United States in spite of their Emancipation Proclamation by President Abraham Lincoln in 1863. This segregation is observable not only in buses where the “colored sections” are at the very back of them, but also in trains. If for example Whites board a bus and there
is no room, Blacks are forced to move, stand or leave it. They are not allowed to sit directly across the aisle from a white person. Blacks are forced to board it from the back to avoid walking past a white person on the front of it. In Mama Flora’s Family, Haley’s efforts to account for this form of segregation grounded in the American history are evident in the passage in which he refers to the conditions of black Americans in trains:

The men already on train were cheerful enough, White men in the first six cars, Blacks in the last three, and leaned out the windows to call encouragement to their joining fellows, and, perhaps, to reach the sad good-byes and be reminded of their own (p. 240).

This quotation demonstrates that in trains black American soldiers are not allowed to sit where they want, for there are specific seats for them and for white American soldiers, too. The author’s use of the expressions “white men in the first six cars” and “Blacks in the last three” shows not only how Whites are more privileged than Blacks, but also how the latter are rejected by their white counterparts in the United States. These expressions also mean that black American soldiers are prohibited to have seats in the front of trains, for their place is in the back. This prohibition attests of their inferior position as people of “second zone” before Whites who take them for granted because of the color of their skin. The fact of fighting alongside with Whites to defeat Germans does not even make white Americans consider them as full American citizens who deserve good treatments. These white Americans’ wrong views over Blacks which appear as a new form of slavery Blacks are confronted with in the white man’s world draw the reader back to “the black slaves’ plight on plantations where Whites keep them inferior to them and in a total ignorance of intellectual notions” (Nzambi Mikoulou: 2016, 1057). Similarly John Oliver Killens in And Then We Heard the Thunder (1993) accounts for this racial situation grounded in the American history by referring to a dialogue between a white bus driver and a white soldier in these terms: “All right, get aboard, the driver said. But these men were here before us, the serious faces white soldier said. That’s the colored line, the driver said. They get on last. That’s the law” (Killens: 1993, 119).

The sentence “these men were here before us” attests of this white soldier’s recognition of Blacks not as “submen”, but as full American citizens who are equal to Whites with the right to seat at any place in a bus. This passage suggests that there are some Whites who condemn the racist views of their brothers and sisters over Blacks. These racist views that Blacks continue to endure not only in the American Army during the Second World War, but also in the civilian life are not invented by white American soldiers themselves, but are initiatives of both, the white officers and the Government, as the driver says “that’s the law”. Here, the blame is put on the Government that is on white American authorities, because they are aware of Whites’ brutality on their black counterparts, but they do nothing to solve this situation.

One of the severe problems black American soldiers are confronted with in Haley’s novel is also their enforced separation from Whites in public places such as schools, restaurants, restrooms, and drinking fountains:

Within the confines of the base, segregation ruled the black men had their own barracks, showers, and latrines, their own mess, their own canteen, their own shop. They officers were white but other than that they had no contact with other white men during their hours on duty (p. 281).

In this passage, the author shows that there is a strict prohibition made to black soldiers to be seen in latrines, canteens, or barracks only reserved to Whites. Black American soldiers, although fighting alongside with white American soldiers to defeat Germans who are supposed to be their enemies, are rejected by their white counterparts for the simple reason that they are black. This rejection suggests that any Black who attempts to break these rules established by the Army, is seen as a transgressor of the laws of the society, and can be jailed or murdered. For, these rules are also recognized by white American authorities who want them to be applied not only in the Army, but also in all the spheres of the United States, as evidenced by this passage: “Because they were soldiers and not raw recruits, the officers were more relaxed, and the sergeants did not always shout. The laws of segregation still applied and were enforced, but with more tact than in Georgia” (p. 288).

The last sentence of this passage brings evidence that what black American soldiers are experiencing in the American Army is not new to them, because it reflects their experience of slavery in Georgia where “white masters blamed, whipped, sold, and killed them just like animals” (Nzambi Mikoulou: 2016, 1817). The laws of segregation that the author reconstructs in his novel even push Whites to engage in a fight against Blacks who attempt to break these laws, as Flora states:

Several of the hotheads, for the thrill of it, went looking for trouble, daring to drink at the white water fountain, and sassing those who tried to stop them, until the sheriff came. A couple of nights
later, there was a big fight, almost a pitched battle, in the park, and Willie was there (p. 132).

The expression “the white water fountain” is a direct reference to segregation between Blacks and Whites in the American society. For, if there is a white fountain there must also be a black one where Blacks are supposed to drink or get water as required by the laws of the American Government. But, the transgression of these laws by Blacks here shows that they no longer accept such abuses on them by their white counterparts. These racial situations that the author relates throughout his narrative are far from being his own invention or imagination, for in And All Our Wounds Forgiven (1994), too, Lester reconstructs them by referring to the prohibition made to Blacks to be seen in restaurants only reserved to Whites:

Just because you are white and can walk into any restaurant in this nation and be served does not mean you are free. It only means you are privileged, and privilege always exists at the expense of another’s degradation. The Negro cannot be free until you stop being white (Lester: 1994, 56).

Through this passage, one sees how the author blames the wrong views of Whites over Blacks, for he persuades the first to accept the second with the color of their skin so that this category of people who are black be accepted in the white man’s world and be treated the same way as Whites. The author’s sentence “just because you are white and can walk into any restaurant in this nation” makes it clear that there is segregation between Blacks and Whites in the United States. For, Whites are the only people who are allowed to be served in any of the American restaurants simply because they are white. This privilege given to them by the American Government attests not only of Black’s non consideration as true American citizens, but also of their rejection in a world ruled by Whites. This rejection is not limited in the civilian life, but continues to be seen in institutions like the United States’ Army. In fact, while Blacks are rejected in restaurants, German prisoners of war are easily accepted just because they are white:

You boys know we don’t serve colored here. We ignored him, and just stood here inside the door, staring at what we had come to see the German prisoners of war who were having lunch at the counter. We continue to stare. This was really happening. It was no jive talk. It was the Gospel truth. The people of Salina would serve these enemy soldiers and turn away black Americans (Litwack: 2002, 45).

One sees that despite black American soldiers’ decision and motivation to defend their country they are rejected and seen as “submen” by white Americans. The sentence “we don’t serve colored here” suggests that the color of Blacks’ skin is the cause of the latter’s rejection in the United States. It also shows how Blacks are segregated in this community, for if a human being is never served in a given place just because he is black, there might also be another human being with a different color who is accepted and served at the same place. What is really shocking here is that white Americans are ready to give better treatment to German prisoners of war, but not to their black fellow citizens who participate in the American Army to defend the country, as Willie a black soldier in the novel tells evidence: “I scared a’ that, Willie admitted. I scared to death a’ dyin’. But I joined the army to defend my country, and until they lets me fight, I ain’t a real American” (p. 238).

The way Haley puts an emphasis on racial segregation in the context of the Second World War suggests that there is a restitution of historical facts in his work of fiction. For, he gives the impression to make the reader hear the voices of those who provoked this war. One may believe that if Mama Flora’s Family does not mirror the American reality, it does give to the reader a general view of what was going on in the American Army during the wartime. One may argue that the publication of this novel gave more opportunity to people around the world to know about the situation of Blacks who accepted to fight and die for the defense of America during the Second World War, but were shocked to find out that white Americans were their natural enemies.

Another aspect linked to black Americans’ segregation in the American society is the prohibition made to them by the American Government to be educated in the same schools as Whites. This means that if white Americans have schools where they get education, Blacks must also find their own schools, because Whites are not ready to share public places with Blacks who are different from them in terms of the color of their skin. Haley describes this racial situation through the character of Flora who finds it better for her son, Willie to be enrolled in one of the Blacks’ colleges instead of relying only on agricultural activities which depend on seasons, as evidenced in this passage:

She let herself imagine he would stay at school, and perhaps, in the fullness of time, even do something more. There were colleges for Negro boys, and hard work and good grades – and a scholarship – would get Willie into one of them. He would get his degree, and then a job, a regular job, a well-paying job, one not dependent on the season or the white
This passage brings evidence that most of the American public places are prohibited not only to black American soldiers, but also to black civilians who are condemned to get education in schools only reserved to Blacks. This prohibition suggests that even though a school belonging to Whites is near a black man’s domicile, he has no alternative than finding a school for Blacks where he can easily enroll his children. The sentence “there were colleges for Negro boys” evidences that the author deals with segregation in this passage. For, if there are colleges for black Americans, there are surely colleges for white Americans, too, because Whites are opposed to the conception of equal education in the United States, as Martin Luther King states:

They were denied a political voice, refused equal education resources (enforced ignorance), confined to an economic system that left little room for ambition or hope, subjected to a criminal justice system that operated with ruthless efficiency in upholding the absolute power of whites to command black subordination and labor (King, quoted by Litwack, ibid., 38).

Through this passage, Martin Luther King shows how black Americans are totally separated from white Americans who still see them as inferior individuals. The refusal of “equal education” in the United States by Whites suggests that they are afraid of seeing their black counterparts discover their weaknesses, and perhaps having better marks than the ones they may have in classrooms. They even fear Blacks who may find the opportunity to blame them for their wrongs over them. One understands that what Haley develops in his novel is really a reconstruction of the “Jim Crow principles” which were not only the monopolies of the American Army, but also were extended in all the spheres of the American society as a new form of slavery undergone by Blacks. These “Jim Crow principles” suggest that Blacks constitute a menace to the white man’s life and freedom, as Margaret Walker in J ubilee (1966) writes: “All of them felt that in one way or another, the freed black people were a menace to the lives, property, and liberty of white people and their Government” (Walker: 1966, 271).

Such a quotation may leave the reader with the impression that the fact of considering Blacks as a “menace” to the lives of white Americans is the cause of racial segregation extorted by the American Government.

Segregation in the American Army is excessive that Haley in Mama Flora’s Family continues to account for it with reference to white Americans who serve their enemies in restaurants where black American soldiers are not only refused service, but are also prohibited to be seen, as shown in this passage:

A large number of German prisoners of war were interned nearly, and it was a matter of continuing bitterness among the black troops that German could be served in restaurants and bars where black American troops were not allowed. This bitterness was only slightly alleviated when rumor spread that the army was to form the first colored combat division, and it would be here at Fort Huachuca (p. 288).

This passage also shows how black American soldiers who are fighting alongside with white American soldiers to defeat Germans are rejected where the “so-called enemies” are accepted just because they are white. This injustice is grounded in the history of Blacks in the United States, because the historian Altman also shows it through the characters of Ezell Blair Jr, Joseph McNeil, David Richmond, and Franklin Mc Cain who sat down at a segregated lunch counter in order to have coffee, but were told “we don’t serve negroes here” (Altman, 2001, 200).

If expressions like “bitterness” and “colored” are used by Whites during the wartime it means that Blacks’ situation in the United States remains the same as in slavery. These expressions also give more light on the notion of Blacks’ segregation by their white counterparts. For, the word “colored” is linked to segregation as it separates Blacks from Whites who continue to take them for granted.

This racial conflict developed by Haley in the context of the Second World War is exactly the same as the one experienced by black American soldiers during the First World War, as evidenced by the historian Hodges who writes:

They were segregated, and insulted (when stationed in the South) by their officers and by civilians and were assigned to inferior facilities relative to those given Whites. Black servicemen were extremely unhappy about the lack of decent housing, transportation, and recreation at the posts where they were stationed (Hodges: 1974, 206).

As it can be seen, what black American soldiers are facing in the American Army during the Second World War is nothing but the oppressions they were victims of during the First World War. This means that Blacks’ expectation of change after the war in the American Army as well as in the civilian life appears as a nightmare with...
regard to the treatments inflicted on them by their white counterparts.

Haley continues to account for Blacks’ segregation by Whites through the character of Reverend Jackson who complains about the way they are treated in these terms: “We cannot drink from the same cups, we cannot eat at the same table, and we cannot sleep in the same bed” (p. 228).

This quotation attests of Blacks’ experience of segregation in the American society. One sees how everything is separate and how Blacks are prohibited to share the same cups, tables, and beds with Whites because of their “dark color”. This segregation brings evidence that Blacks are not considered as full American citizens, but as inferior individuals who are condemned to live under the authority of Whites despite the law which makes them equal to them. This inferior position they occupy before the white man shows how white Americans are indifferent to their sufferings in the United States. For most of white Americans, segregation is viewed as a legal practice even though it does not enable Blacks to profit from the advantages of the American democracy:

For the most part, segregation was not a major issue for the Whites in Stockton, merely a fact of life and law. The two communities lived in segregated alliance, and the rules were so established that if the line was ever crossed, it was easily restored (p. 132).

The author’s mention of this passage is a way not only to account for segregation in the American society, but also to draw the reader back to the Jim Crow law. One knows that after the abolition of slavery, a great number of white Americans preferred segregation to mixing the races, as Dalfiume writes: “Perhaps as revealing, a majority of Whites interviewed in the north East and West expressed a preference for separate schools, separate restaurants, and separate neighborhoods for the races” (Dalfiume: 1968, 103).

This passage brings evidence that Haley has incorporated actual-historical events linked to the United States in his novel, for what Dalfiume says here is exactly what he develops in his work of fiction. This means that there is an encroachment between history and fiction in his narrative.

The experience of black people on the American soil which Haley relates cannot be limited to the description of segregation. The reader can also sense how this need for historical truth draws the writer to Blacks’ discrimination by their white counterparts.

2. THE REFERENCE TO THE BLACK AMERICANS’ DISCRIMINATION

In Mama Flora’s Family, the author demonstrates black Americans’ discrimination by their white counterparts on the American soil through the character of Willie who complains about the wrong treatment they endure in the American Army during the Second World War:

What you want us to be, cooks an’ stevedores an’ mess men, jus’ cos we black, part of the army but not soldiers? When we are ev’rywhere, officers an’ sergeants an’ grunts an’ when we fight – an’ when we die – then we is men. An’ if’n we have to die to do it, then it be worth the price. An’ less’n we do that, then all we ever gon’do is hump cotton and clean latrines (p. 239).

In this passage, Willie blames the wrong views of white officers who do not give them any opportunity to fight on the battlefield so as to insist on their American citizenship. In fact, what one may confess here is that when black Americans enlist in the American Army, they are not allowed to fight because they are not seen as true American citizens by white Americans. For the latter, the one who is supposed to defend America must be a true citizen whose color is white, but not black. The very last sentence of the above passage shows what black soldiers are used to doing in the American Army. This means that instead of doing the real job of a soldier in the wartime which consists in shooting his enemies dead, black soldiers are humping cotton and cleaning latrines.

The author through Willie shows the willingness of black American soldiers to fight and die for the defense of a country that rejects them. For black soldiers, America is also their country because it was built up with the sweat and blood of their ancestors. This means that when it comes to defending it they must be associated as true American citizens.

Willie’s expression “jus’ cos we black” in the above quotation shows clearly that he knows the real cause of their rejection by white Americans on the American soil. This expression attests of what happened to Blacks during the Second World War, for Willie is trying to recall black soldiers’ situation during this period of time, as he goes on saying: “I’s a soldier. Soldiers fight. An’ until they lets us fight, I ain’t a real soldier (...). I joined the army to defend my country, and until they lets me fight, I ain’t a real American” (p. 238).

For Willie, to be equal to Whites is to act the same way as them, because he thinks that if white Americans are fighting and dying to defend the
American system, it means that they are showing their citizenship before the nation and the world. For this reason, he believes that if black Americans do not do the same, they are not equal to Whites regarding the task of citizenship, as he says to his mother: “Don’t you see, Ma, he said, until we is equal wit’ the whites, we is only ever half men, not complete. An’ until they lets fight alongside wit’ the whites, we ain’t equal.” (p. 239).

The same racial situation experienced by Willie in the American Army was also visible in the civilian life in the United States, as evidenced by Bluesman Big Bill, a black soldier during the Second World War:

_When I was born in this land, this is what happened to me: I was never called a man and now I’m fifty-three. When Uncle Sam called me I knew I would be called the real MC Coy. But when I got in the army they called me soldier boy. When I got back from overseas, that night we had a ball, I met the boss the next day, he told me ‘Boy get you some overall. I wonder when I will be called a man_ (Litwack: 2002, 49).

This passage evidences the way not only white soldiers looked at black servicemen, but also the way all Whites looked at Blacks. In fact, the word “boy” used by Whites in order to call Blacks whatever their age was not shared by the latter. For, Bluesman’s complaint testifies Blacks’ dissatisfaction about this calling.

Haley’s account for black American soldiers’ discrimination by Whites in the American Army during the Second World War is also evident in the passage in which he describes Willie as the embodiment of all Blacks who gave their lives for the defense of America during the wartime:

_Willie came home, soldiers. Albie took Flora and Ruthana with Ernestine in the Oldsmobile to the railroad, and it thrilled Flora’s heart that several of Willie’s friends were there, cheering and waving tiny flag. He jumped from the train in triumph, more handsome in his uniform that Flora could ever have imagined_ (p. 238).

This passage attests of Blacks’ participation in the Second World War. For Flora, Willie who embodies all black soldiers in this war is pictured as a new-born child, because the world of his school failure is now replaced by that of his engagement against the enemies of the United States. This means that Flora’s dream of seeing Willie succeed in his life has come true: “This was the man she had always hoped her son would be, and if he lacked his father’s dream of a formal education, it was irrelevant. Life had taught him more than any schoolbook, and he faced the future confidently, without fear” (id.).

This passage shows that Booker’s dream of seeing Willie succeed in school has never come true. But the participation of Willie in the American Army is a kind of compensation to this failure. That is why Flora thinks that the American Army has put Willie away from self-destruction and sin, as the author writes:

_This was the sinner saved, and Flora thanked her Maker for it. Her journey to her past, her journey to find Luke, even if it had not been fulfilled, had been the start of it, and the war its culmination. She prayed that the end would not be more painful than she could bear_ (p. 237).

Willie is aware of the fact that the eradication of racial discrimination in the United States must only be the result of their daily efforts. But, despite their efforts observed in the battlefield to fight alongside with white American soldiers so as to defeat Germans, Blacks are still discriminated just because they are black. This fight is not the author’s invention, but a true fact of history because it is also recognized by the historian Harris who writes:

_We have died in all American wars which saw America grow by establishing physical superiority with our help. We have been progressively duped into believing that the white ruling class has been working to help the Negro achieve his full and equal rights. This has been proven to be a lie – time and time_ (Harris: 1983, 156).

This passage shows the historical dimension of Haley’s novel. This means that there is an intertwining between history and fiction in his text. This intertwining classifies his narrative into the category of historical novels.

Blacks’ discrimination by their white counterparts in the United States pushes Willie and his wife, Ernestine to complain about their children’s fate. For, they think these children have come to a world that will reject them like their parents because of the color of their skin: “They were beautiful, those tiny babies, but he wept because the indignities and injustices the color of their skin would bring to them, and from which he could protect them” (p. 256).

In this passage, the author demonstrates the worries that African Americans have for their children. For, they believe these children have come to a world that will not accept them, but will reject them because they are black. This racial discrimination which prevailed in the United States is not only reconstructed by Haley, but also by Lester (1994) who demonstrates how black Americans are deprived of freedom because of the American constitution which restricts their rights:
If white senators and white congressmen, white governors and white mayors would so openly and brazenly and willfully disobey the constitution, why should not Negroes brazenly disobey laws that were unconstitutional? If Southern Whites broke the law to uphold injustice, the Negro had to break the law and uphold justice (Lester: 1994, 20).

This passage testifies the absence of true democracy in the United States, for Lester denounces the American constitution which does not respect the fundamental rights of Blacks as human beings. This constitution which encourages injustice is criticized by the narrator who argues that “Blacks have to break the law to uphold justice”. It is indeed because of this racial discrimination that some black Americans think of going back to Africa to get rid of the United States which, for them, is a racist community. But, some of them still retain their doubt, because they believe that all black generations were born in America, as evidenced by Reverend Jackson in these terms:

Some say we should go back to Africa, he said. But I say why! We were born here, and our fathers were born here, and our fathers’ fathers, and all the generations that we know! Yet a white man who arrived here yesterday is better regarded than us. (p. 229).

The last sentence of this passage is indicative, for it attests of Blacks’ non-consideration by white Americans in the United States. In fact, Whites are ready to give better treatments to any white foreigner regardless of his origin but not to Blacks because of their black skin. This passage reconstructs a real fact of history, because the historian Marcus Garvey upholds what Haley demonstrates in his novel:

Blacks could not achieve equality through “status quoins” in racist America. He believed that a return to Africa was the best solution for an oppressed people in an alien and hostile land. But, being a practical and visionary man, he realized that it was hardly possible that all Blacks everywhere could or would return to Africa, in the physical sense (Garvey, quoted by Hodges: 1974, 185).

The ill-treatments endured by black American soldiers in the American Army during the Second World War are excessive that in Mama Flora’s Family, Haley continues to demonstrate how Willie is deeply shocked because of Whites’ wrong views over Blacks. For example, When Ab’s wife, Martha, proposes him to go back to the fight for the defense of the American system, he rejects this proposal, because he fears for his family and his own future, as shown in this passage:

His return to Stockton was joyous, for several reasons. During all of the long journey home, Willie had made certain decisions about his future, but it wasn’t until he had closed the door on the past, when he said goodbye to Martha, that he felt free to put those decisions into effect. After leaving Martha he went to the ware house and was told that there was a job for him whenever he wanted (p. 303).

One understands that the wartime unity of black Americans with white Americans to defend the American system and democracy is wiped off their minds as the war grows with its racist machinery. Willie’s resignation from the American Army does not mean that he is afraid of death. It only means that it does not make sense to be shot dead for a country which does not recognize the minimum of Blacks’ efforts.

CONCLUSION

Alex Haley’s account for segregation and discrimination between Blacks and Whites in the United States in Mama Flora’s Family is drawn from the American history. Black Americans’ forced separation from their white counterparts and their ill-treatments by the latter contextualized by the author are conceptual tools that form historical core in this novel. Despite the black Americans’ complaints about their non-consideration as full American citizens who deserve civil rights like every human being on the earth and their massive participation in the American Army to fight alongside with white American soldiers so as to defend America, black Americans are deeply shocked to find out that their non-consideration remains a reality, because Germans who are supposed to be their enemies are not only better treated than them by white Americans, but also received and served in the places where all Blacks are prohibited to be seen and served because of the color of their skin. Through the author’s reconstruction of such attitudes of white Americans toward their black counterparts known as racial segregation and racial discrimination, one may say that Haley has succeeded in exploring the literary question which consists in representing time and space in a work of fiction.

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