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THEORETICAL/CRITICAL ESSAY ARTICLE

## Unrestrained Nature in Cummings' "O Sweet Spontaneous" and Lohani's "Gaia": A Disregard to Anthropocentric Ecocide

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### Abstract

*The self-centered human activities have tremendous adverse impacts on ecology at the present time, thereby turning the earth into an unwelcoming and inhospitable place for the species. However, nature responds to such ecocidal anthropocentric actions with the continuation of life as a sweet gift. In this context, this study aims at analyzing how literature undermines such anthropocentric activities and presents the earth or the nature as the mother who is very compassionate, protective, and affectionate to her children and is always accountable to them. This study also exhibits how anthropocentric activities invite ecocide and what the response of nature is. In the conflict between human-centered actions and responses of nature, the study also investigates whether nature or the earth forgets her duty. For this, the study makes a critical study of the masterpieces, "O Sweet Spontaneous" by E.E. Cummings and "Gaia" by Shreedhar Prasad Lohani. This qualitative study applies ecocritical and one of its approaches, deep ecological notions to scrutinize how these poems negate ecocide drawn by anthropocentrism. An in-depth analysis of these poems reveals that the anthropocentric philosophy is actually the main cause of ecocide. However, nature, on her part, is very spontaneous and unrestrained who always forgives the serious and notorious human actions and is dedicated to bestow 'spring', that is, life to all the organisms which is her major responsibility. In this respect, this study opens an avenue for people about the self-realization of their exploitation of nature and calls for creating this world a common place for all the species.*

**Keywords:** Anthropocentrism, deep ecology, earth, ecocide, ecocriticism, nature

### Introduction

Today's world is massively contaminated by human being's shortsighted economic, scientific and development activities. This has imposed a serious threat to the world's ecology. Consequently, we are forced to "live in a world increasingly lost to

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pollution, contamination and industry-sponsored bio-disaster" (Nayar 241). This enormous damage to ecology makes it clear that "mankind is efficiently committing ecocide, making the planet inhospitable for life of any kind" (241). It also indicates, "We are on a destructive – and ultimately self-destructive course" (Barry 29). In the contemporary time, the direct adverse effect of such activities "on world's ecology is already substantial. In future, it may be catastrophic" (Pakenham 185). Therefore, our activities are oriented towards creating substantial damage to nature, thereby digging our graves.

The destruction of nature affecting the existence of all the creatures as well as the impending disasters caused by human beings is discussed in many literary pieces. Many studies have been conducted to expose the negative effects of human activities on nature and to make a plea for the protection of nature and survival of all the organisms as represented in literature. However, there are very rare studies conducted from the perspectives of the battle between anthropocentric disposition and spontaneity of nature. In this regard, this study aims at analyzing such activities leading to ecocide and nature's unrestrained power represented in the poems of Cummings and Lohani. It also explores the clear 'deep ecological' concerns of the poets manifested through their poems.

Pertaining to this, the present study primarily follows a qualitative methodology. It adopts interpretive and analytic approaches to explore how literature negates anthropocentric philosophy and actions. It also scrutinizes how the anthropocentric activities are leading to ecocide and what nature's responses are to those activities as expressed in Cummings' "O Sweet Spontaneous" and Lohani's "Gaia". To accomplish this task, this study applies ecocritical theory in general and its major approaches, anthropocentrism and deep ecology in particular. Moreover, to establish its major proposition, the study also takes references from other secondary sources.

This study, especially, answers three questions:

1. How are anthropocentric activities leading to ecocide as expressed in the poems of Cummings and Lohani?
2. What is nature's reaction to such activities?
3. Does nature forget her responsibility and let this earth vanish?

### **Review of Literature**

Cummings' poems are viewed from many critical lenses by scholars. Some of them view his poems from graphological or typographical dimensions whereas some others from ecological and philosophical dimensions. Terblanche, in the article, "The Osmotic Mandala: on the Nature of Boundaries in E.E. Cummings' Poetry", examines the nature of boundaries in Cummings poetry. He remarks that Cummings' poetry "signals particular perspectives on the nature of boundaries, including the ones between self and nature, as well as those boundaries implied by grammatical, typographical and traditional poetic constraints" (9). In this paper, he concludes that Cummings' poems are "acutely natural, as many of his critics know. It is therefore strange to think that the poet has not enjoyed more direct ecocritical treatment" (19). However, this study does not delve into the conflict of ecocide as well as anthropocentric disposition and deep ecology as one of the major approaches of ecocriticism. Terblanche, in another book on Cummings, *E. E. Cummings: Poetry and Ecology*, looks at the poetry of Cummings from multiple angles. Especially, he notices interconnection among modernism, nature and Taoism. In this sense, he remarks, "His poetry may be said to occur at the intersections of modernism, nature engagement, and (hence) his Taoism with its feather-light yet deep connection between poetry and nature" (14). He further states that Cummings, through his poetry, is able to "create a substantial poetic ecology" (239-240) where "a deep love

of nature underlies, and surfaces in, his poetry" (240). Looking through these lines, it becomes clear that Terblanche is just glorifying and exploring different dimensions of Cummings' poetry instead of unfolding the crisis between anthropocentric attitude and ecocritical philosophy.

Arthos, on the other hand, focuses on the use of rhetorical devices, texture, language and rebellion in Cummings' poems. He also finds issues of Protestantism in his poems. In this regard, he says, "a Protestant rebelling against Protestantism, he has a particular stake in asserting the value of his feeling" (379). Therefore, he uses language in such a way that expresses his rebellious attitude. Similarly, Gómez-Jiménez also studies the unconventional stylistic tactic of Cummings' poetry. In her intensive study, she discovers:

that there are three basic unconventional devices in Cummings' use of punctuation marks (substitution, omission and insertion) and that these help Cummings to achieve a variety of purposes: emphasize certain elements within the poem, shift the tempo of the lines, create chaotic scenes, produce iconic effects, schematize any unit within the poem, omit letters and words, signal heteroglossia, indicate imperative voice, articulate the poem into different layers, create plays on words, and reproduce features of spoken language. (191)

Such use of a deliberate stylistic approach in his highly experimental poems is compatible to the themes of his poems. In other words, it can be said that the style or structure contributes to the texture or the theme of the poems.

In the article, "The Poetics of E. E. Cummings", Springer, studies the poetics of Cummings. As an example, he takes lines from Cummings' poem 'O Sweet Spontaneous' and shows the stylistic and syntactical features of this poem. He maintains:

A close look at the sentence as a whole reveals that the placement of its elements on the page has rhythmic and semantic functions. Pace, emphasis, and meaning are directly controlled by the positioning of words, and by both the inclusion and omission of punctuation marks. Behind this rhythm of placement and omission, however, is a more common measure: the basic, underlying meter is standard iambic pentameter. Furthermore, the two sentence-halves rhyme. (8)

It is an undeniable fact that Cummings excels in using strange stylistic features contributing to the meanings of his poems.

In the like manner, Lohani's poem 'Gaia' has also been studied from ecocritical lenses. But very few studies have been conducted viewing this poem as a conflict between anthropocentric attitude and ecocritical viewpoint. It, therefore, remains a major area of study to unfold many layers of the deep ecological significance of this poem. According to Shrivastwa, the poet "advocates ecological, environmental issues in his poem" (8) and "is making a plea to protect, respect our earth mother" (9). Pointing towards some terrible consequences, Sapkota also perceives this poem as "the destructive manifestation of the mother-earth devastated by the activities of human beings" (43). Therefore, this poem, in essence, stands against the anthropocentric notion, which firmly believes in man's complete right over nature.

### **Ecocide, Anthropocentrism and Ecocritical Philosophy**

Ecocide refers to either deliberate or unintentional destruction of nature by human beings. According to *Stop Ecocide*, it is "mass damage and destruction of ecosystems – harm to nature which is widespread, severe or systematic. ECOCIDE, committed repeatedly over decades, has created the climate and ecological emergency that we now face." It also implies the "most recent crisis of mass extinction of species. Ecocide indicates the horrifying scope and cumulative effects of the human-induced

crisis of mass extinction and habitat destruction" (Broswimmer 2-3). Such kinds of human activities oriented towards the damage of the ecosystem and extinction of other species are also considered as the "spiritual and intellectual impoverishment for humanity" (7). When analyzing the pervasive negative effects of ecocide intensively, it can be found that it not only affects the natural environment and other species but it also affects the local people. In this context, Bales argues:

Ecocide pushes local people into greater vulnerability as their normal livelihoods disappear, making them more vulnerable to slavery—the slavery, in turn, drives further destruction of the local and planetary environments. The same thugs and criminals, whether they are officials, rebels, or "businessmen," who drive slavery at this level of the supply chain are guilty of ecocide. (Unit 3, Para 16)  
A kind of crime, ecocide not only creates vulnerability to the plants and animals but also to the local people, thereby making an inhospitable place and causing the extinction of them. Apart from this, it also invites social evil like slavery and other crimes.

Ecocide also can be perceived as kind of genocide which destroys the intimate relationship of human with nature. In this direction, Lindgren states:

"Ecocide is also a possible method of genocide if it fragments or destroys vital socioecological and cultural relationships between humans and nature. Practices that inflict ecocide are hence often responsible for the destruction of ecological and social life-systems that face adversities due to deteriorating ecological conditions. (525)

Therefore, it is a serious concern, which needs to be eradicated to establish a harmonious relationship between humans and nature. This kind of crime is brought by anthropocentric tendency, which holds that human being is the central entity of this world.

Similarly, the devastating consequences on nature are also brought about by anthropocentric philosophies. Anthropocentrism, a philosophical standpoint, holds the idea that human being is the central entity of the world. In other words, it is "an outlook that places mankind at the centre of the universe; the tendency to ascribe a particular significance to human beings and to human concerns in the general scheme of things" (Mautner 20). Having deep roots in many religious and philosophical worldviews, it views that "everything in nature exists for the sake of man" (20). This makes it clear that it completely disregards the independent and inherent values of nonhumans, that is, the intrinsic values. Rather, it asserts, "the nonhuman world and/or its parts have value only because, and insofar as, they directly or indirectly serve human interests" (McShane 170). From this, it becomes obvious that "it undermines some of the common attitudes – love, respect, awe – that people think it appropriate to take toward the natural world" (169). Sometimes, "anthropocentrism is expressed as a charge of human chauvinism" (Boddice 1). However, "alternative, non-anthropocentric or anti-anthropocentric views include ecocentrism, biocentrism, and similar framings" (Padwe, 2013, Oxford Bibliographies in Ecology). In this sense, "In response to anthropocentrism, they offered "ecocentrism" (closely related to "biocentrism"), which does not privilege the interests of any one species, such as human beings, over any other in the biosphere" (<http://ehc.english.ucsb.edu/>).

Contrary to anthropocentrism, ecocriticism or ecocritical philosophy does not endorse human beings' complete authority over nature and non-humans. First emerged, as a critical approach, in the USA in the 1980s and as Green Studies in the UK in the 1990s, ecocriticism refers to "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty). According to Glotfelty, it "takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies" (XVIII). This approach covers both critical stance and

theoretical discourse, thereby creating a larger scope ranging from literature to the outer world, "the entire ecosphere" (XII). In this context, she further writes, "As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman" (XIX). Therefore, it remains a major critical and theoretical approach, which not only includes human beings but also the entire world.

Regarding the context about the origin of ecocriticism, the contemporary human created social, economic and environmental milieu played significant roles. It, as pointed out by Nayar, "originates in a bio-social context of unrestrained capitalism, excessive exploitation of nature, worrying definitions and shapes of 'development' and environmental hazard" (p. 241). Pointing towards adverse impacts of scientific tryouts and counter effect on humans, Kohzadi & Azizmohammadi state, "the human being through scientific experiments has always been dangerous to nature and his experiments have always had a deleterious impact on nature in a way that the reflection of these damages has always come back to human being himself" (655). Therefore, the major concern of ecocriticism is to analyze the "effect of human beings on nature" (655), human beings themselves and other species. In this sense, it becomes clear that human activities are solely responsible for the degradation of nature, and as a result, a favourable environment for the origination of ecocriticism.

As a reaction to the human-centered approach and as one of the aspects of ecocriticism, Arne Naess, a Norwegian philosopher, brings an environmental philosophy, deep ecology, which argues that we "must recognize the values that inhere objectively in nature independently of human wants, needs or desires" (Keller 206). However, Naess, the founding figure of deep ecology sees the possibility of destruction of our natural surroundings by human beings if they do not fulfil the whims of human beings. Pointing towards the ruthlessness of human beings, he states that for man "animals, plants, and natural objects are valuable only as a resource for human beings. If no human use is known, they can be destroyed with indifference" (43). Unlike the anthropocentric viewpoint, "for deep ecologists, nature takes precedence over human beings" (Bertens 227). They "find authenticity and purity only in the virgin wilderness ... attribute intrinsic value to all life" (227). Such an act of valuing other species is actually the best way of protecting our nature.

This study, therefore, analyzes the poems of Cummings and Lohani from these critical lenses. It explores the ecocritical and deep ecological consciousness of the poets, which blurs the doctrines of anthropocentrism and ecocide.

### **Cummings' Spontaneous Earth and Anti-Anthropocentric Doctrine**

Best studied for graphological and morphological styles, "O Sweet Spontaneous" by E.E. Cummings is also equally significant for its ecological theme. This poem stands against an anthropocentric attitude, which ultimately leads to ecocide. It talks about the deteriorating condition of the earth caused by unsympathetic humankind. For this, he blames science, philosophy and religion, all the human creations and practices for exploiting the earth for their selfish wants, thereby inviting a devastating condition. The components and creations of human culture, "religion, philosophy and science have always been of the components of anthropocentrism" (Kohzadi & Azizmohammadi 660) which, according to the poet, are always oriented towards the destruction of nature. However, the poet also eulogizes the earth filled with sweetness and spontaneity, which never forgets its duty of giving life. Therefore, this poem disregards such anthropocentric activities that eventually invite ecocide.

Cummings condemns philosophy for pinching and poking the earth by its 'doting fingers'. He asserts:

The  
doting  
          fingers of  
prurient philosophers pinched  
and  
poked  
thee, (Firmage 58)

Cummings scorns philosophy as lustful, which ruthlessly pinches and pokes the earth. Through the use of words like 'pinched' and 'poked', he shows the childish behaviour of philosophers who are not serious about the earth or the nature. This shows that they do not respect the earth. Philosophy is also a human-centered pursuit of wisdom. But for Cummings, it is lustful or shameless which always pinches and pokes the earth. This clarifies that this human-created discipline does not value the earth. Therefore, Cummings negates it.

Similarly, the poet manifests his disdain for science. He states that science is also responsible for destroying the beauty of the earth. It has converted the earth into a lab for the experiment of destruction. To fulfil the whims and caprice of the scientists, they perform destructive activities on the earth, which ultimately leads to its destruction. He says:

has the naughty thumb  
of science prodded  
thy  
beauty (58)

He criticizes science that has prodded nature with its 'naughty thumb' and destroyed its beauty. It has converted the earth into a laboratory where scientists, in the name of invention or discovery, are continuously conducting dangerous activities. They seem very reckless about the negative effects of their experiments. Their anthropocentric activities cause ecocide, thereby making the place inhospitable. They only think about how to contribute to the progress of mankind being completely unconcerned about what happens to other creatures, the earth and eventually to themselves.

This also needs to be viewed from another angle that we are also oriented to destroy ourselves because according to Commoner's, first law of ecology, "everything is connected to everything else" (29). This implies that everything in this nature is connected in a thread, and the effect on one element has some effect on other elements. Pointing towards the illusion of advantages of scientific technologies he argues, "in the eager search for the benefits of modern science and technology we have become enticed into a nearly fatal illusion: that through our machines we have at last escaped from dependence on the natural environment" (6). In this sense, Bertens maintains that "there would, after all, be no reason to have ecological concerns if we did not really know for sure that our human activities caused real damage to the natural environment" (229). Therefore, we are moving towards the path of self-destruction for which science, through our anthropocentric whims, plays a major role.

Further, the poet alleges religion, too. He expresses that religion is also exploiting and squeezing the earth continuously. He says:

          how  
often have religions taken  
thee upon their scraggy knees  
squeezing and

## Unrestrained Nature in Cummings' "O Sweet Spontaneous" and Lohani's "Gaia"

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buffeting thee that thou mightest conceive  
gods ((Firmage 58)

In these lines, he expresses that religion, one of the elements of human culture, does not find any value in nature. It is pushing and pressing the earth using its utmost power. In *Religion and Ecological Crisis: "The Lynn White Thesis" at Fifty*, Levasseur and Peterson talk about The Lynn White Thesis, which

"makes the three particular claims that have prompted the most outgoing debate and discussion since the article's publication. First, he argues that ideological and cultural factors, especially religion, are the root causes of the "ecological crisis" facing contemporary humans. Second, he identifies Western Christianity as particularly influential in creating environmentally destructive attitudes. Third, he suggests that, just as fundamental causes of ecological destruction are religious, so too must their solution be religious. (2)

This displays that the problem of environmental crisis has a long root that needs to be solved through religious means.

However, the poet says that nature is so sweet and so spontaneous that she never forgets her duty. She always offers a sweet gift no matter how notorious our ecocidal and anthropocentric behaviours are. With this reference, he says:

(but  
true  
to the incomparable  
couch of death thy  
rhythmic  
lover  
thou answerest  
them only with  
spring) (Firmage 58)

Nature or the mother earth always disregards anthropocentric activities. It is always accountable. It never forgets its responsibility. There remains freshness deep down the earth. In return for the destructive activities of humankind, nature always gives them a sweet gift, that is, life. Its sweetness and spontaneity never vanish. It never gets tired of giving life. According to the poem, the answer or the gift to those inattentive human beings who drag the earth closer to death is not other than the spring, that is, life. It clarifies that nature is never oriented to take revenge. It always forgives our follies and blesses us with life. Therefore, it is very foolish to think that the earth counter-attacks and pays back or avenges.

Science, philosophy and religion are the elements of human creation. These human disciplines are created for the ease of human life. For the sake of human progress, these disciplines are continuously attacking the earth or the nature. They are making earth very ugly and unfriendly and hostile. Only for fulfilling their own desires, human beings have become very selfish. Human beings consider themselves the supreme creature who believe that everything must be in their control. They hold the stern belief that all the elements or the species have value until they serve the human interest. As soon as they lose their value in the views of human beings, they lose their existence. This kind of anthropocentric outlook is the root cause of the deterioration of the earth. This is also one form of ecocide. In such a situation, it is quite normal to think that the earth will take revenge on human beings. However, the earth or nature is like our mother who forgives our foolish and selfish misdeeds and always bestows life to us. It is unrestraint, which never gets affected by human activities in blessing life to different species on the earth.

This poem, therefore, undermines the anthropocentric actions resulting in the ecocide. It blames the human disciplines like philosophy, science and religion for the deteriorated condition of the earth or the nature. Nevertheless, the poem also establishes a clear idea that the earth or the nature is not filled with rebellious feelings. It is always dutiful and merciful. Therefore, it always bestows life on the earth.

### **Lohani's Enduring Earth: A Disregard to Human Dominance**

Lohani's poem 'Gaia' also disdains anthropocentric tendency leading to ecocide. Rather, it holds an ecocentric view and manifests earth as very unrestrained despite many activities to damage it. While discussing more this poem, it becomes crucial to know about 'Gaia' and 'Gaia Hypothesis'. Gaia is "the ancient Greek Earth-goddess" (Garrard 173) whereas the 'Gaia Hypothesis', developed by James Lovelock, believes that the "earth could be described as a self-regulating system, analogous to a living organism" (174). This hypothesis, according to him, "seems to support an ecocentric perspective, because it enjoins us to consider policies in terms of their effects on the biosphere as a whole" (102). From this, it becomes clear that this poem also suggests us to be very careful about our policies and activities so that we can avoid damaging 'Gaia', the 'Earth-goddess'.

This poem also describes destructions caused by human beings on the earth. It says that due to our insensitive behaviour "the earth (or Gaia) is in pain ... "yet she endures". The implicit warning is that if humankind continues to exploit the earth recklessly, Gaia may strike back" (Nissani and Lohani 281). However, endurance does not always mean possible 'strike back'. Since nature is considered a mother, she undoubtedly behaves like a mother and "keeps on bearing the hardships. The earth is not perishable" (Sapkota 43). It is the grandeur of the earth that she continues her work despite the devastating actions of humankind. Therefore, "we have to respect her to live on the earth smoothly, happily and peacefully keeping things whole" (43). It suggests that our activities should not be oriented towards inflicting the earth.

The poet shows some consequences of anthropocentric activities. He writes:

The searing wind among the withered  
palms—  
The devouring rain—  
The sea with its cavernous frothy mouth—  
The crooked beak of a mountain peak—  
Time plucks at the world  
On its gray gaunt wings—  
The smell of mildew  
Shrouds the house—  
Turbulence and hunger  
All around—  
Yet—  
She endures. (Nissani and Lohani 275)

These lines depict that the earth is facing many problems caused by human beings. This has brought many negative effects on the earth. The images like 'the searing wind', 'the withered palms', 'the devouring rain', 'the sea with cavernous frothy mouth', 'the crooked mountains', suggest that the earth is in pain. Pointing towards this, Sapkota writes, "the earth is shrouded with rotten smells of destructive activities, turbulence and hunger. Despite all these changes in physical manifestations of nature along time, the earth keeps on enduring all these transgressions and manifestations" (43). According to him, "human being holds anthropocentric belief" (43) which is the root cause of the

degraded condition of the earth and is a serious threat for today's world. It is also very obvious "this threat is prompted by human hubris" (Joshi 4) and "their anthropocentric vision" (4). However, the implied meaning is that the earth is very benevolent. Therefore, she endures everything.

Presenting the terrible condition of the earth or nature caused by human beings, the poet also disregards ecocidal anthropocentrism. He views human beings are solely responsible for the present condition of the earth. Therefore, he opposes anthropocentric philosophy through this poem. Implicitly, he views that nature and human beings must reconcile together to avoid such kind of hostility. He also opines that the earth is very merciful and persistent. While enduring all the mishaps brought by human beings, she never deviates from her responsibility.

### **Conclusion**

This study demonstrates the deep ecological and ecocritical consciousness expressed in the poems of Cummings and Lohani. It traces the conflict between anthropocentric disposition, the root cause of ecocide, and unrestrained nature in their poems 'O Sweet Spontaneous' and 'Gaia' respectively. The study, through the analysis of these poems, also manifests that nature is very conscientious, responsible and dedicated to continue life on the earth. Despite huge destruction brought to nature by human-centered activities, nature or the earth is always unorthodox, benevolent and compassionate to all the species of the earth.

These poems show that nature is a vital force, not controlled and not ruled by anybody or anything. Therefore, it is self-governed. It is futile to think that nature is filled with the feeling of revenge and rebellion. She does not lose her temperament. She also does not become wayward. Ignoring the petty activities of humans, she keeps on doing her work.

The poems are against the anthropocentric philosophy, which brings about the current disturbing condition of nature. All the activities conducted keeping human beings at the centre ignore the intrinsic values of other species. These activities are motivated by the human desire of controlling, exploiting and domesticating the species. Therefore, such self-centered activities of human beings are actually devaluing the existence of other species. The earth or the nature is not only for human beings. It is a common habitat of all organisms. However, we suppose ourselves to be the only creature who is supreme and possess all the rights to determine the existence of others. The present-day disasters like climate change, global warming, pollution, etc. are human invited calamities that occurred in course of fulfilling such crazes of humans. Therefore, such man-centered actions are the main causes of the current ecocide. This negation of values of other species is seriously attacked in the poems. Moreover, these poems advocate for the equal values of all creatures. The fruit of 'sweetness', 'spontaneity' and 'endurance' is not only for human beings. To conclude, nature protects all. Nature blesses all and it gives life to all.

This reading, although concentrates on how nature negates the mishaps brought by anthropocentric actions, opens the avenues for further investigations focusing on ecofeminism.

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## Unrestrained Nature in Cummings' "O Sweet Spontaneous" and Lohani's "Gaia"

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## **Unrestrained Nature in Cummings' "O Sweet Spontaneous" and Lohani's "Gaia"**

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