

“People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them”: An Exposition of Historical Trauma in *There There*

Anju E.A.

Abstract

Contemporary period is marked by various individual and collective afflictions and Trauma Studies has become more exciting, challenging and fastest growing discipline than ever. Cultural studies and its associated discourses like New Historicism, Postcolonial Studies, Memory Studies, Spatial Criticism Linguistic Relativism linked with Psychoanalysis make Trauma Studies much more intricate. This research paper attempts to explore the concept of historical trauma and its fictional representation in the novel *There There* (2018). In particular, penetrating into the concept of Historical Trauma with its origin as a term in the discipline of Humanities, the paper attempts to analyse how the concept of historical trauma has become a hidden meaning and discursive space of a literary text. Accordingly, the research paper will bring a wide-ranging awareness of the impacts of historical trauma and the narrative representation of historical trauma as a discursive content embedded within the narrative of the novel.

Keywords: Cultural paradigm; Discursive content; Historical trauma, Humanities; Trauma Studies.

For more than five decades, Trauma Studies has been one of the fastest growing interdisciplinary areas of study within the broad discipline of Humanities. It mainly focuses on the psychological, sociological, political, linguistic and cultural impacts of any traumatic experience upon human character and identity. Linnie Blake defines trauma studies as “a theoretical caucus that attempts to articulate and critique the diverse ways in which traumatic memories have been inscribed as wounds on the cultural, social, psychic and political life of those who have experienced them,

and those cultural products that seek to represent such experiences to those who have not" (1). As an academic discipline, Trauma studies mainly focuses on the individual and collective traumatic experiences and their haunting consciousness in times of genocide, ecocide, political violence, economic depression, colonisation, slavery, technological takeovers, natural disasters, wars, medical experimentation, and so on. In order to interpret illustrations and its subsequent profound impacts of a wounding experience upon an individual's self and memory, trauma studies use many precepts of psychoanalytic theories also. Scholars from the discipline reached the conclusion that there are many complex psychological and sociological factors which have a direct or indirect influence upon human perception of a traumatic experience. They also analysed the effects of acute traumatic experience on human language. Literary theorists focus on the representation of trauma in literary narratives. They argued that there is always a resistance to speak about an extreme painful and terrible event which is very difficult to properly understand or incorporate into a normal life. Though many people resist an overt telling of their trauma, at times, intense feelings and traumatic memories are fused in their literary narratives. Judith Herman describes this paradoxical situation: "The conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma" (1). Thus, trauma theorists claim that reflections and repercussions of suppressed traumatic experiences are evident in literary narratives. Trauma Studies focus on the cultural and psychological impacts of trauma in literature and society and tries to examine the diverse literary devices by which literary texts have reflected and responded to unspeakable and indescribable traumatic experiences.

In *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001), Dominick La Capra appreciates the relevance of trauma studies in the post-war period. He observes that the term trauma has developed into "a prevalent preoccupation in recent theory and criticism," or even "an obsession" (x). The term trauma can be defined as a severely disruptive response to a deeply distressing or disturbing event, that intensely influences a person's emotional organization and perception of external world. Experiences that fall into many categories, such as rape, violent crime, accident, warzone, natural disaster, pandemic, social marginalisation or persecution, or genocide, can be classified as traumatic. Though a traumatic experience can be depressing and disrupts one's mental stability when it happens, the fully traumatic impacts of the event will be experienced in later times only. To denote this delayed response to the traumatic impacts, Freud uses the term *Nachträglichkeit* which can be translated as "deferred action," "belat-

edness," or "afterwardsness" (Teresa de Lauretis 118). While defining the concept of trauma, Cathy Caruth highlights the notions of "latency" and "belatedness". She vividly elucidates the disturbing nature of repeated possession and hauntedness in one's life engendered by traumatic experiences. In her text *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Cathy Caruth writes: "A response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event" (1995: 4). According to her, traumatic experiences have a persistent control over the life of an individual though it can be repressed for a long period. For her, trauma is a ride between one's painful past and more painful present. Thus, regarding trauma, the traumatic memories are more important than its primary experience. For Cathy Caruth, trauma is a mental state which carries indelible marks of past traumatic experiences upon an unprepared psyche and consequently compels one to live one's life as a "possession by the past" (1995: 51). In other words, as Cathy Caruth contends "the traumatic event is its future" and is "fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time" (1995: 8). The past experience remains in the consciousness and begins to control the future of an individual. Dori Laub also strongly emphasizes the crucial influence of traumatic past in one's life and delineates the subsequent impacts of the traumatic past in the future:

While the trauma uncannily returns in actual life, its reality continues to elude the subject who lives in its grip and unwittingly undergoes its ceaseless repetitions and reenactments. The traumatic event, although real, took place outside the parameters of "normal" reality, such as causality, sequence, place and time. The trauma is thus an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after. This absence of categories that defines it lends it a quality of "otherness," a salience, a timelessness and a ubiquity that puts it outside the range of associatively linked experiences, outside the range of comprehension, of recounting and of mastery. [. . .] The survivor, indeed, is not truly in touch either with the core of his traumatic reality or with the fatedness of its re-enactments, and thereby remains trapped in both. (69)

Hence, he clearly stipulates that the future of an individual is also trapped in his traumatic past. With a ghostly nature, traumatic memories persist in one's life with its enigmatic existence and perpetual come backs. Those

memories act as a latent agent in the formation of individual and cultural identities. In the light of this premise, one cannot undermine the potential influence of memory and history in one's life.

Kai Erikson was the first sociologist concerned with the societal dimensions of trauma. While absorbed on the impacts of the massive flood at Buffalo Creek, he formulated the idea of collective trauma. He starts with individual psychological trauma as part of deep wounds which is the result of a stress or blow in human psyche. The individual psychological traumas can also cause various behavioural disorders. Erikson opines that "Sometimes the tissues of community can be damaged in much the same way as the tissues of the mind and body" (1995:185). A traumatised person can experience a wide range of traumatic emotions and memories both immediately after the event or long term. Studies have shown that survivors of large-scale trauma experiences like being in a dreadful natural disaster, in a war zone or a terrible accident cannot forget the pain of excruciating traumatic experiences which is not manifested in the act of survival itself. In reality, the impact of trauma is most often evident only after a long period when the actuality of the event has passed. The traumatic experience persists and even transmits to survivors' later generations. Consequently, even without a personal and conscious knowledge of the initial traumatizing event, survivors' later generations have become subsequent generations of trauma survivors. Simply by the virtue of their relationship with the survivors, the subsequent generations of the survivors bear some hall marks of some cumulative emotional and psychological wounds which can profoundly influence their identity also. This long legacy of collective trauma which can be spread over across various generations is called historical trauma. In contrast with psychic trauma, which is generated from an individual experience, historical trauma is generated from collective experience.

According to Alex Iantaffi "Historical trauma is a term used to indicate the cumulative impact of historical events that affected people from one generation to the next" (25). Hence, the appellation historical trauma has been defined as multigenerational trauma experienced by a distinct ethnic or cultural group. The term was first coined and used by indigenous scholar Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart in her study of the impacts of Holocaust. Historical trauma is generally understood as something generated out of major historical events that overloaded a specific faction of community due to their oppressive experiences. The term was first used to describe the haunting experience of children of Holocaust survivors. The term was later used to describe generations that have gone through

a history of profound loss caused by persecution, or any massive group trauma exposure. There have been many incidents throughout the history such as slavery, forced migration, the Holocaust, genocide, ecocide, or the violent colonization and victimisation of various indigenous tribes that have trapped a group of people into such a disruptive state of mind. Even if one does not see any noticeable symptoms of wounds which are clearly inscribed on the societal, emotional, political and cultural psyche of some of these people, most of them may experience poor overall physical and mental health, including low self-regard, feeling of dejection and self-destructive behaviour, alcoholism, etc. The texts that articulate and critique the psychological, social and cultural ramifications of historical trauma are engaged to address themselves to various potent factors that influence destruction and reconstruction of individual and group identities. Moreover, they examine different psychic and social sites which accumulate and disseminate some complex and collective traumatic experiences over time and across generations by a community who has a common identity, affiliation, or circumstance.

Tommy Orange's celebrated novel *There There* (2018) addresses the issue of historical trauma as its main thematic focus. This research paper is an attempt to examine the irreversible effects of the impact of historical trauma on Native American people are demonstrated through a narrative fictional discourse. Tommy Orange belongs to the indigenous Native American tribe called Cheyenne. The novel depicts the life style of Native Americans living in the main land of America during the postcolonial period. While delineating the struggling phases of twelve characters from Native American communities, the novel tries to highlight a wide array of challenges that Native Americans endure in order to survive in a civilised community. Moreover, the book also has some prose narrations on Native American history and their struggle for individual status and authenticity. This wondrous and shattering novel was also in the contest for the 2019 Pulitzer Prize for literature till the end.

Tommy Orange's writings perpetually revolve around the Native American history, culture and society. The novel *There There* (2018) is written with an aim of raising voice to the experiences of Native Americans. The novel beautifully explicates the lives of 'Urban Indians' who are the second generation of Native American people. Though, they are indigenous tribes, they are destined to 'be born in the city,' and are struggling to live in American urban spaces. The novel is a multigenerational story focusing on the lives of twelve Native American characters are destined to meet at Big Oakland Powwow. In addition to the fictional account of the

lives of diverse twelve Native American characters, the narrative discursively contains many searing articles on Indigenous identity, culture and history.

Texts with trauma as a central theme deal with unbearable human conditions of emotionally destructive experiences. However, it is a more difficult situation to represent the truth of an experience that the human mind cannot contain. Trauma scholar Dori Laub, precisely states that the paradox of trauma literature lies in this simultaneous “imperative to tell” and “impossibility of telling.” So, very often, trauma writers are frustrated by their inability to narrate the pangs of the traumatic experiences into a narrative. Nevertheless, in *There There* Tommy Orange has tried to deal with the theme of historical trauma in a very conspicuous way, despite such problems. He suggests that it is better to recount the traumatic aspects even if it is not absolutely possible to represent the inexpressible. Throughout the novel, novelist depicts many characters who are piloted by the “imperative to tell.” The characters like Opal, Edwin and Dene Oxendene are struggling to narrate the diverse and multidimensional stories of their historical oppression and present-day invisibility. The stories narrated by them are replete with the trauma of the loss of their family and damage of their culture. Opal expresses the power of stories in reconstructing past and in that way overcoming the trauma:

She told me we could only do what we could do, and that the monster that was the machine that was the government had no intention of slowing itself down for long enough to truly look back to see what happened. To make it right. And so what we could do had everything to do with being able to understand where we came from, what happened to our people, and how to honor them by living right, by telling our stories. She told me the world was made of stories, nothing else, just stories, and stories about stories (Orange 50).

She remembers what her mother has told her about the power of storytelling. According to her mother the accurate narration of forgotten and misrepresented stories should be the ultimate goal of a misrepresented marginalised group. These stories contradict and break the existing stereotypical chronicle of Native population and by this means give a relief to their repressed wounds. Dene Oxendene’s story telling project is also stems from this urge to depict the variety and vitality of Native American life. Dene is very much conscious the lack of proper historical representation of the harrowing traumas of Native American life. Voicing, listen-

ing and sharing of the influence of those inherent but forgotten moments serve as an opportunity for a sympathetic understanding of them. He wants to reveal the legacies of historical trauma of indigenous genocide and discrimination of each Urban Indian character bears throughout their life. He says: "Sometimes not having a story is the story" (Orange 122). Foucault points out that a struggle for narrative recognition is a conspicuous element of any historical trauma narrative. Since Tommy Orange comes from an Indigenous Indian Community, *There There* itself can be considered as a part of Native American efforts to narrate and overcome their historical trauma.

In the novel, author devotes a prologue and interlude to explicate the unflinching and gruesome violence and cruelty endured by the indigenous population during the colonial period. According to Alexandra Alter these nonfiction essays are very significant in the narrative because they are: "brief and jarring vignettes revealing the violence and genocide that Indigenous people have endured, and how it has been sanitized over the centuries." In these incisive and darkly humorous episodes, author attempts to throw a torch light upon the ethnocide and genocide which resulted in the depletion and devastation of Native American population all over the continent since 1400's. Orange's prologue is an indictment against dehumanisation of indigenous population after colonisation. He points out the innumerable ways of colonial machinery in which Native American population were being treated less than human. All the characters in the novel are confronted by various psychological reactions to these traumatic historic episodes. The narrator of the prologue underlines that history functions as socially endorsed memory: We are the memories we don't remember, which live in us, which we feel, which make us sing and dance and pray the way we do, feelings from memories that flare and bloom unexpectedly in our lives like blood through a blanket from a wound made by a bullet fired by a man shooting us in the back for our hair, for our heads, for a bounty, or just to get rid of us" (Orange 13) The relationship between community and their history is clearly explicated in these lines.

Tommy Orange, as a member of Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes of Native America, believes that Native people are pretty invisible like the crimes committed against them by the colonial machinery. As a part of the explication of the deep-rooted violence endured by the natives, the prologue of the play accentuates the image of Indian Head. His probe into the depiction of how the image of Indian Head is ingrained in the conscience of American main stream society emblematically marks the

violence enforced upon them at a particular period of history. He quotes many historical examples which foreground and critique the atrocities committed against natives. He pointed out that the first 'thanks giving' land deal meals ended with the death of 200 native population from unknown poison. He also punctuated the fact that Native American Heads are even exhibited as medals of honour. Thus, it is against this backdrop that Native Characters in the novel are determined by the historical legacy of oppression and genocide. Tommy Orange believes that the present-day life of Urban Indians only can be analysed in compliance with the historical trauma that has been imposed on them over the years.

Theorists like Michael Rothberg and Kai Erikson have posited that any form of trauma can be considered as a reflective process which connects traumatic past to living reality through various representations and imaginations. The novel *There There* deliberately interiorized the articulating discourse surrounding the concept of historical trauma. Even while representing devastating trauma of genocide, popular media like newspapers, radio, or television always prefer to reflect dominant interest and hegemonic ideas. In the prologue, the novelist discursively foregrounds the socially mediated processes related with collective trauma. Orange discusses with many examples how the culture of Native American people is being appropriated and distorted for the entertainment in the mainland. Novelist argues that the appellation of Indian Head and its visual representation is an eye-opener to the hegemonic reconstitution and reconfiguration of colonial violence and genocide through the popular media. The beheading of Indigenous people and preservation of the heads as souvenirs was a common practice in colonial regime. Moreover, the image of Indian Head is contemptuously inscribed in logos, jerseys, mascots, flags and coins. The mass-mediated selected content of colonial past always affects the psyche of a wider public. The novelist is ironically depicting the articulating discourse surrounding the Indian Head:

There was an Indian head, the head of an Indian, the drawing of the head of a headdressed, long-haired Indian depicted, drawn by an unknown artist in 1939, broadcast until the late 1970s to American TVs everywhere after all the shows ran out. It's called the Indian Head test pattern. If you left the T V on, you'd hear a tone at 440 hertz – the tone used to tune instruments – and you'd see that Indian, surrounded by circles that looked like sights through riflescopes. There was what looked like a bull's-eye in the middle of the screen, with numbers like coordinates. The Indian's head was just above the bull's-eye, like all you'd need to do was nod

up in agreement to set the sights on the target. This was just a test. (Orange 8)

Thus, the image of Indian Head can be considered as a part of the novelist's imaginative project of exposing the contemporary American attitude towards genocides. Elizabeth Alexander identifies that these scenes of massive butcheries Native Americans have become extremely ecstatic American national spectacle. Though, majority of the contemporary Native American people who are forced to live in the urban spaces might not have experienced a direct genocide episode, the mediation and imaginative representation of traumatic events which indirectly sanitising and promoting the butcheries of Native Indians impose terrible catastrophic effects upon them. The psychological baggage of these sinister representations at the moments of collective spectatorship demands a pervasive remembrance which involves a people's sense of itself. Therefore, the novelist attests the fact that not only the traumatic experiences but the remembrances of them can produce profound cumulative traumatic effects over many generations.

While describing the intergenerational characteristics of trauma, Eduardo Duran introduced the concept of 'soul wound' to illustrate the collective cumulative trauma of a specific ethnic group over generations. In his book *Healing the Soul Wound: Counseling with American Indians and Other Native Peoples* (2006) Duran, studies trauma from an American Indian perspective. He identifies the manifold ways by which the traumatic events impose an indelible mark or a 'wound on the soul.' He argues that any terrific traumatic historic event can cause harm to the harmonious interconnections of mental and physical status of an individual. He again points out that the effects these traumatic events are possibly passed on to one's offspring and manifested across generations. History acts as a continuous force in the lives of all the major characters in the novel. To indicate how much the inherited legacy of traumatic history influence one's future lives, the author uses the metaphor of living wound. Orange implies that the wound in the psyche of a community is the result of hundreds of years of colonial oppression and denigration: "The wound that was made when white people came and took all that they took has never healed. An unattended wound gets infected. Becomes a new kind of wound like the history what actually happened became a new kind history. All these stories that we haven't been telling all this time, that we haven't been listening to, are just part of what we need to heal" (Orange 113). Throughout the novel, Orange demonstrates that colonialism has inflicted grave injuries to Native people. In reality, for the Native Americans or the Urban Indians, their

inherited traumatic history is a wound. Stories of Whites' valorisation of the butchery of Indians are realities of life for urban Indians. Though, they have survived those traumatic historical instances, the memories stayed with them throughout their lives like "old Cheyenne story about a rolling head" that refuses to be stopped, even after death (Orange 10). This repository of a history of massacre and disembodiment enforced upon the natives a cultural tradition which was rooted in banishment, pain and ordeals. The inability of the natives to get out of its consequences is beautifully symbolises through the image of the mysterious living wounds. In other words, inexpressible historical trauma resorts to the metaphor of wounds.

Historical trauma works in a very slow and insidious manner. It lies dormant in the human consciousness of those who suffer from it. The dormant feeling of the pain of the traumatized group became fatal and powerful to change their consciousness and identity. The de-sentimentalized and detached narrative of the novel employs spiders as a powerful symbol to show the inherent connection between history and present-day existence. Opal and Orvil discovered spider's legs from their body at different times. Opal's mother always reminds her that spiders symbolize both home and traps at a time. For Opal her uncle Ronald's house was both a home and a trap to her. Orvil was a staunch admirer of his own native heritage who was determined to learn about his culture even after many discouragements from his dear ones. As a part of the reclamation of his own indigenous culture he taught himself to dance through the help of You Tube videos. Orvil also found spider's legs in the lump of his leg immediately after his decision to join the powwow competition. In fact, he is totally unaware of the fact that his grandaunt Opal experienced the same phenomenon. Hence, the spider legs indicate the inextricable continuity between generations. Moreover, they symbolise the fact that one cannot easily escape from one's native heritage and history. Spider legs serves as a metaphor for the historical legacy of oppression and genocide which continue as a perpetual shaping force and dictates the characters' experiences and actions throughout their lives.

Since historical trauma spreads over multiple generations, it manifests itself in manifold trauma related symptoms. Cultural turmoil of a community creates an eternal crisis of identity in people's consciousness. Brave Heart argues that members of disrupted culture are always burdened with a mass of unresolved grief. What weights in their heart is their inability to return to their original native culture. The weight of their trauma forces them together as a community at any costs. The gathering of Native

people at the end of the novel for the Big Oakland Powwow is due to their hidden urge to be connected to their historical legacy and identity:

We all came to the Big Oakland Powwow for different reasons. The messy, dangling strands of our lives got pulled into a braid—tied to the back of everything we'd been doing all along to get us here. We've been coming from miles. And we've been coming for years, generations, lifetimes, layered in prayer and hand-woven regalia, beaded and sewn together, feathered, braided, blessed, and cursed. (Orange 112)

They believed that revival of the elements of Native culture and some common cultural practices that can repair the grievous injuries and its subsequent pervasive sense of pain inflicted by the colonial violence. All the characters' efforts, though in different ways, to keep their community's common history and culture alive seem to emphasize the existence of the historical trauma in community's subconscious.

Throughout the novel, violence manifests in manifold ways. The prologue and interlude of the novel unfold the inherited historical legacy of genocide and coercion. Both the narratives are bursting with the motifs of blood and bullets. Though each of the characters of the novel narrates different sets of experiences, all of them are moulded by a common traumatic history of disembodiment and displacement. The novel begins around a series of events in relation to the festival Big Oakland Powwow. In reality, a deep-rooted hidden desire for recognition and togetherness forces the Urban Indian community to celebrate Big Oakland Powwow. The inevitable violent episode that happened at the end of the novel has its roots in the historical trauma which reside in the psyche of the Native American characters. All of the characters are trapped in intercultural sentiments in their own ways though a few were vainly trying to deny or escape from it. Eventually, they realize that it is very difficult to escape from the weight of one's traumatic past because they were all inextricably linked by their own traumatic histories and a shared cultural consciousness:

Something about it will make sense. The bullets have been coming from miles. Years. Their sound will break the water in our bodies, tear sound itself, rip our lives in half. The tragedy of it all will be unspeakable: the fact we've been fighting for decades to be recognized as a present-tense people, modern and relevant, alive, only to die in the grass wearing feathers. (Orange 116)

The depiction of a horrifying massacre of urban Indians by themselves at the end of the novel attests how difficult it is for them to come out of the historical trauma of centuries of violence. In fact, the heritage and history of their ancestors have a hidden control on the actions of the future generations also. Since, violence is a part of broader Native American historical trajectory, the novelist argues that there is an inherent presence of violence among the lives of Urban Indians even in the contemporary America.

Native scholars like Brave Heart and DeBruyn highlight that owing to the genocide and ethnocide endured by the Native American people, the community goes through a certain kind of traumatic experience which likely to be transferable through generations. They have pointed out that emotional outbursts arising from intense traumatic experiences cause severe stress upon the survivors' which has much physical and psychological impacts. Advocates of historical trauma have identified many human responses against historical trauma. The scholars termed this as Historical Trauma Response (HTR). Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart in her "The historical trauma response among natives and its relationship to substance abuse: A Lakota illustration" explains the effects of cumulative emotional harm of a community by historical trauma and variety of ways in which HTR is exhibited among the affected communities. She argued that as a result of this irresolvable trauma, much dysfunctional and self-destructive behaviour can be revealed among the community through generations. Diverse historical trauma responses like depression, psychic numbing, difficulty recognizing and expressing emotions, low self-esteem, poor affect tolerance, anger, elevated mortality rates from suicide and cardiovascular diseases, self-destructive behavior, and may include substance abuse and self-medication have been identified among the survivors of various collective trauma (Brave Heart & DeBruyn). Moreover, many other researchers also argued that indigenous people subjected to historical trauma have an innate tendency to develop an addiction to alcohol.

Tommy Orange presents many characters who are suffering from drug abuse and alcoholism. Tony Loneman is a twenty-one-year-old Native American, who comes first among the twelve characters is a prime example for this phenomenon. He is suffering from foetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) which he named 'the Drome.' As he had enough alcohol in uterus, he determined not to drink alcohol even when he was old enough. Jackie Red Feather fell into alcoholism during the period of facing teenage problems. Thomas Frank had to tell a story of losing his job as a janitor at the Indian Centre in Oakland because he was drunken behaviour. Calvin Johnson, his brother Charles, Carlos and Octavio Gomez were drug ad-

dicts and drug peddlers. *There There* makes it clear that the prominence of alcohol addiction in major characters' life have some historical roots. "Your drinking, which was related to your skin problems, which was related to your father, which was related to history." (Orange 176) Novelist foregrounds an argument that the prolific substance use of natives can be seen as a Historical Trauma Response associated with the unresolved impacts of Historical trauma. Further, the novelist suggests that they consider alcoholism and drug abuse as a coping mechanism to face the problems of life. In this way, every character's alcoholism is projected as a coping mechanism against trauma when they have nothing else to do to counter it.

Brave Heart locates that historical trauma is triggered by "unresolved grief across generations" (2000: 60). She argued that this "historical disenfranchised grief" evident in manifold ways through multiple generations of Indigenous peoples. Though colonial powers are reluctant to acknowledge this historical unresolved grief, it has numerous critical implications and its impacts are noticeable in several ways upon the lives of its silent victims. *There There* beautifully illustrates the impacts of collective inter-generational wounding upon Native American people who are forced to live in contemporary urban spaces of America.

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