
POSTHUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS AND HUMANISM ACROSS BRITISH, AMERICAN,
POSTCOLONIAL, AND CONTEMPORARY LITERARY TRADITIONS GLOBALLY

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ABSTRACT

This paper traces the migration of literary studies from the liberal humanist paradigm toward a posthuman critical consciousness, arguing that contemporary fiction in English constitutes a laboratory in which subjectivity, cognition, ethics, materiality, and planetary relationality are being radically reconfigured. Drawing on an interdisciplinary framework that synthesizes cognitive literary studies, critical posthumanism, narrative ethics, affect theory, and decolonial epistemologies, the paper reads British, American, postcolonial, and contemporary world literatures as convergent yet differentiated sites of post-anthropocentric imagination. It contends that the posthuman turn is not a repudiation of the human but a redistribution of the human across technological, ecological, and more-than-human networks, and that decolonial thought is indispensable to any posthumanism that does not merely universalize a Euro-American crisis of Man. The paper concludes by proposing planetary relationality as the horizon within which literary form, ethical response, and epistemic justice can be rethought together.

KEYWORDS: Posthumanism, Cognitive Literary Studies, Narrative Ethics, Affect Theory, Decoloniality, Anthropocene, World Literature

1. INTRODUCTION

The figure of “Man” that anchored Western literary culture from the Renaissance through liberal modernity—rational, autonomous, self-transparent, and sovereign over nature—has entered a period of sustained crisis. Climate breakdown, artificial intelligence, genomic engineering, mass extinction, and the persistent afterlives of colonialism have together exposed the classical humanist subject as a parochial and exclusionary construction rather than a universal given. Critical posthumanism names the intellectual response to this crisis: not the abolition of the human, but its reconstitution as embedded, embodied, relational, and accountable to the more-than-human world (Braidotti, 2019). Literature, this paper argues, has not merely reflected this transition; it has actively produced the conceptual grammar through which posthuman consciousness becomes thinkable.

The stakes of this transition are simultaneously ontological, cognitive, ethical, material, and planetary. Ontologically, the boundary between human and nonhuman—animal, machine, ecosystem—has become porous in both scientific description and narrative representation. Cognitively, mind is increasingly understood as extended, enactive, and distributed across bodies, tools, and environments rather than sealed within the Cartesian skull (Hayles, 2017). Ethically, the circle of moral considerability has widened to include clones, androids, animals, rivers, and future generations, demanding new narrative techniques for soliciting readerly responsibility (Phelan, 2017). Materially, new materialist thought insists on the agency and liveliness of matter itself, from toxic chemicals to fungal networks (Alaimo, 2016; Tsing, 2015). And at the planetary scale, the Anthropocene compels literature to narrate humanity as a geological force while decolonial critics remind us that this “humanity” was never one: the Anthropocene has always been differentially distributed along racial and colonial lines (Yusoff, 2018).

This paper pursues these five vectors—subjectivity, cognition, ethics, materiality, and planetary relationality—across four overlapping literary archives: British fiction of the artificial person, American fiction of distributed and vegetal cognition, postcolonial fiction of environmental violence and multispecies survival, and contemporary world literature of planetary entanglement. Its method is deliberately interdisciplinary, triangulating cognitive literary studies, critical posthumanism, narrative ethics, affect theory, and decolonial epistemologies. The wager is that no single framework suffices: cognitive approaches without decolonial critique risk universalizing a Western mind; posthumanism without narrative ethics risks celebrating hybridity while evading responsibility; affect theory without materialism risks dissolving politics into feeling. Read together, however, these frameworks illuminate how literature is remaking the very category of the human for a damaged planet.

The paper proceeds in eight movements. Following this introduction, Section 2 assembles the interdisciplinary framework. Sections 3 through 7 then read the four literary archives along the five conceptual vectors, moving from the intimate scale of the manufactured subject to the widest scale of planetary relation. Section 8 draws the threads together into a programmatic conclusion for what the paper calls a decolonial posthuman literary studies. Throughout, the emphasis falls on form as much as theme: it is in narrative technique—focalization, scale, voice, temporality—that literature performs, rather than merely describes, the transition from humanist to posthuman consciousness, and it is therefore through close attention to technique that criticism can measure that transition's depth.

2. Theoretical Framework: An Interdisciplinary Constellation

Critical posthumanism provides the paper's overarching architecture. Braidotti (2019) distinguishes posthumanism proper—the critique of humanism's exclusions—from post-anthropocentrism, the critique of species hierarchy, and argues that the “posthuman convergence” of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the Sixth Extinction demands affirmative, relational modes of subjectivity rather than nostalgic returns to Man. Ferrando (2019) similarly frames philosophical posthumanism as post-humanism, post-anthropocentrism, and post-dualism at once: a refusal of the binary machinery (mind/body, culture/nature, self/other) through which humanism secured its sovereignty. Crucially, both thinkers insist that the posthuman subject is not a disembodied information pattern but a materially embedded, ecologically accountable assemblage.

Cognitive literary studies supplies the framework's account of mind. Second-generation cognitive approaches have moved decisively beyond early theory-of-mind models toward embodied, enactive, and embedded cognition, treating narrative itself as a cognitive technology that scaffolds and reshapes thought (Zunshine, 2015; Kukkonen & Caracciolo, 2021). Hayles (2017) extends this into the “cognitive nonconscious,” demonstrating that cognition is not coextensive with consciousness and that technical systems, from trading algorithms to sensors, participate in planetary “cognitive assemblages” alongside humans. Herman (2018) pushes narratology itself beyond the human, showing how storytelling practices can either reinforce or dismantle anthropocentric hierarchies of mind.

Narrative ethics addresses the question of what stories do to and ask of readers. In its rhetorical formulation, narrative is “somebody telling somebody else, on some occasion, and for some purposes, that something happened” (Phelan, 2017)—a communicative act that positions audiences ethically through technique: focalization, unreliability, direct address. In the posthuman context, the ethical question becomes how narrative solicits response toward beings whose interiority is uncertain—clones, robots, animals, forests—and whether empathy across the species boundary is achievable or even desirable.

Affect theory and new materialism together account for what circulates beneath and beyond cognition. Affective ecocriticism examines how environmental texts transmit fear, grief, wonder, and solastalgia, and how embodied simulation allows readers to feel with nonhuman and imperiled others (Weik von Mossner, 2017; Bladow & Ladino, 2018). Material ecocriticism, meanwhile, treats matter as storied and agentic: Alaimo's (2016) trans-corporeality maps the flows of substances across bodies and environments, dissolving the fantasy of the bounded individual.

Finally, decolonial epistemologies interrogate who the “human” of humanism ever was. Mignolo and Walsh (2018) argue that modernity and coloniality are co-constitutive, and that delinking from Eurocentric knowledge requires pluriversal epistemologies. Mbembe (2019) shows how necropolitics distributes exposure to death along racial lines, while Yusoff (2018) demonstrates that geology itself has been a colonial grammar, rendering Black and Indigenous peoples as extractable matter. Whyte (2018) reframes the Anthropocene from Indigenous perspectives for whom apocalypse is not future but ancestral memory. A posthumanism worthy of the name must therefore be decolonial, or it merely universalizes the crisis of European Man.

These five frameworks are not stacked eclectically but articulated at specific joints. Cognitive literary studies and posthumanism meet in the concept of nonconscious and distributed cognition; posthumanism and narrative ethics meet in the problem of moral standing for uncertain minds; affect theory and materialism meet in the transmission of feeling across bodies and substances; and decoloniality cross-cuts all four, historicizing whose cognition, whose ethics, and whose matter have counted. The framework thus functions as a relay rather than a checklist: each literary archive examined below activates the constellation differently, foregrounding some junctions and backgrounding others, which is itself evidence that posthuman consciousness is plural, situated, and uneven rather than a single global condition.

3. Reconfiguring Subjectivity: British Fiction and the Artificial Person

British fiction of the past two decades has conducted its most searching posthuman experiments through the figure of the artificial person—the clone, the android, the uploaded mind—inheriting and rewriting the Frankenstein tradition for the biotechnological present. Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* and *Klara and the Sun* bracket this development. In the latter, the solar-powered “Artificial Friend” Klara narrates with a perceptual apparatus that literalizes non-human cognition: her visual field fragments into boxes under stress, her theology of the Sun emerges from machine-learning-like inference, and her devotion exceeds that of the humans around her. Ishiguro's technique—restricted focalization through a mind that is genuinely other—forces readers to perform the cognitive work of modeling nonhuman consciousness, precisely the operation that cognitive narratology identifies as literature's distinctive capacity (Zunshine, 2015; Herman, 2018).

The ethical charge of these novels lies in their quiet demonstration that personhood is conferred and withheld socially rather than discovered metaphysically. Klara is loved, used, and finally discarded in a yard; the question the novel poses is not “is she conscious?” but “what do we owe beings we have made to love us?” This is narrative ethics in Phelan's (2017) sense: the reader is positioned as the one audience capable of registering the injustice the storyworld normalizes. Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me* stages the complementary problem—an android, Adam, whose rigid moral consistency exposes the self-serving flexibility of human ethics—while Jeanette Winterson's *Frankissstein* splices Mary Shelley's story with transhumanist Silicon Valley fantasy, satirizing the masculinist dream of disembodied mind uploading that Braidotti (2019) and Ferrando (2019) both identify as humanism's last redoubt rather than its overcoming.

What distinguishes the British archive is its insistence that the posthuman question is inseparable from class, care, and institutional violence. The clones of *Never Let Me Go* are a harvested underclass; Klara is a consumer product in a society stratified by genetic “lifting.” These novels thus refuse the celebratory register of popular transhumanism and instead dramatize what critical posthumanists argue theoretically: that new configurations of the human will be built atop old hierarchies unless those hierarchies are named (Clarke & Rossini, 2017). Subjectivity, in this fiction, is revealed as distributed, manufactured, and relational—constituted through the gazes, dependencies, and disposals of others—rather than the self-grounding cogito of humanist inheritance. The artificial person becomes British fiction's instrument for making the constructedness of all persons visible.

Cognitively, these texts also perform an experiment on their readers. To inhabit Klara's boxed vision or Adam's algorithmic reasoning for three hundred pages is to run an extended simulation of nonhuman mentality, and second-generation cognitive criticism suggests that such simulations leave residues: habits of attention, revised intuitions about where minds can live (Kukkonen & Caracciolo, 2021). British posthuman fiction thereby closes the loop between representation and cognition—it depicts manufactured subjectivities while quietly re-manufacturing the subjectivity of its audience, training readers to hesitate before the question of who counts, and preparing them, formally, for a world in which that question will only grow more urgent.

4. Distributed Cognition and the American Novel of More-than-Human Mind

If British fiction interrogates the manufactured person, the contemporary American novel has increasingly located mind outside persons altogether—in forests, networks, algorithms, and ecosystems. Richard Powers's *The Overstory* is the exemplary text: its “roots” structure braids nine human lives around the slower, vaster lives of trees, drawing on plant-science accounts of arboreal communication to propose that cognition, memory, and even generosity are vegetal capacities. Powers's formal wager is that narrative time itself must be re-scaled: chapters span centuries of chestnut growth, subordinating human plots to dendrological ones. This is what Caracciolo (2021) calls narrating the mesh—the search for formal devices adequate to entanglement, in which plot, character, and setting exchange properties. In *Bewilderment*, Powers miniaturizes the same problem: a neurodivergent child's empathy for vanishing species is technologically amplified through neurofeedback, literalizing the extension of mind and affect beyond the individual skull.

Hayles's (2017) concept of cognitive assemblages illuminates a second strand of American fiction concerned with technical cognition. Don DeLillo's *Zero K* probes cryonic preservation and the fantasy of consciousness without world; its sterile *Convergence* compound stages transhumanism as a death cult of information, against which the novel poses the ordinary, embodied street-life of Manhattan. Here American fiction converges with the cognitive-scientific consensus that mind is enactive and world-involving: to strip away body and environment is not to liberate consciousness but to extinguish it (Kukkonen & Caracciolo, 2021).

Affect is the third axis of this archive. Weik von Mossner (2017) demonstrates that environmental narratives operate through embodied simulation: readers do not merely learn about ecological loss, they feel it in the body's mirroring systems. *The Overstory*'s most discussed effect—readers reporting that they “cannot see trees the same way”—is precisely such an affective recalibration, an attunement of perception to nonhuman temporality and agency. Climate fiction more broadly, as Trexler (2015) shows, has had to reinvent the novel's conventions—its individualist plots, its domestic scale—to register a hyperobject like climate; the American novel's turn toward distributed cognition is thus also a turn in genre, in which realism, science

fiction, and systems narrative hybridize. The result is a fiction in which thinking is no longer what humans do alone, and in which the reader's own cognition is enrolled, through form, into more-than-human networks of attention and care.

The American archive also exposes the political ambivalence of distributed cognition. The same networked condition that Powers renders as ecological communion appears elsewhere as surveillance and algorithmic capture: the cognitive assemblage that lets a forest signal across mycorrhizal webs is structurally kin to the one that lets platforms predict and steer human behavior (Hayles, 2017). The strongest of these novels hold both valences at once, refusing either techno-utopian celebration or reactionary retreat into the bounded self. In doing so they model the critical stance this paper advocates: a posthumanism that affirms relation while auditing the asymmetries of power—corporate, computational, and colonial—through which relations are currently wired.

5. Narrative Ethics and the Postcolonial Posthuman

Postcolonial literature complicates any smooth narrative of posthuman progress, because for colonized peoples exclusion from the category of the human is not a philosophical novelty but a historical condition. Mbembe (2019) names this necropolitics: the colonial and racial ordering of who may live and who is exposed to death. Postcolonial posthumanism therefore proceeds from a double consciousness—critical of humanism's exclusions, yet wary of dissolving a humanity that was never fully granted in the first place. Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* crystallizes this tension. Its narrator, Animal, spine bent by the Bhopal-like gas disaster, walks on all fours and insists "I am not a human being"; his refusal of the human is simultaneously an indictment of the corporate order that unmade him and a claim to a differently embodied dignity. The novel's narrative ethics are confrontational: Animal speaks into a journalist's tape recorder, addressing the "Eyes" of the international reader, implicating the very audience that consumes disaster as story (Phelan, 2017).

Amitav Ghosh's work articulates the epistemological stakes. *The Great Derangement* (Ghosh, 2016) famously argues that the bourgeois realist novel, with its probabilistic worldview and individual scale, is structurally unable to accommodate climate catastrophe—an inability Ghosh links to imperial modernity's partitioning of nature from culture. His novel *Gun Island* answers his own challenge, weaving Bengali legend, cetacean migration, wildfires, and refugee crossings into a form where the improbable is the real. In *The Nutmeg's Curse*, Ghosh (2021) deepens the decolonial argument: the mechanistic view of the earth as inert resource was forged in colonial violence, and planetary crisis is that violence generalized. Postcolonial ecologies thus reveal materiality itself as a colonial question—soil, water, and air are archives of empire (DeLoughrey, 2019).

African and Afrodiasporic speculative fiction extends the archive toward reparative futures. Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* stages first contact in Lagos, distributing narration across humans, a swordfish, a spider, and the city itself, enacting Herman's (2018) narratology beyond the human within an explicitly African cosmology in which nonhuman personhood was never unthinkable. Such texts demonstrate Mignolo and Walsh's (2018) pluriversality in narrative practice: rather than importing posthumanism as another Northern theory, they draw on epistemologies—animist, ancestral, relational—for which Euro-humanism was always the provincial exception. The postcolonial posthuman is therefore not post-human at all, but otherwise-human: a reconstruction of the category from the standpoint of those it excluded.

This archive also sharpens the paper's account of narrative ethics. Where Anglo-American posthuman fiction typically solicits empathy for the excluded, postcolonial texts frequently withhold or weaponize it:

Animal mocks the reader's pity, and Ghosh's improbable coincidences affront the realist reader's epistemic comfort. The ethical work here is not the smooth extension of fellow-feeling but the production of discomfort—an affective friction that marks the reader's implication in the world-systems the novels describe (Bladow & Ladino, 2018). Narrative ethics in the postcolonial posthuman register is thus less about widening the circle of empathy than about redistributing accountability, forcing metropolitan audiences to encounter themselves as characters in the story of extraction rather than as its innocent witnesses.

6. Affect and Materiality: More-than-Human Entanglement in Contemporary World Literature

Contemporary world literature increasingly takes as its protagonist neither the human nor the machine but the entanglement itself—the zone where bodies, chemicals, fungi, and weather interpenetrate. Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation* renders this zone as Area X, a landscape that rewrites the bodies and minds of those who enter it; the biologist's gradual, half-willing transformation dramatizes Alaimo's (2016) trans-corporeality, in which the human is always already traversed by the material world. The novel's affective signature is crucial: not terror alone but a strange, luminous acceptance—what affect theorists would call an attunement to the inhuman that bypasses cognitive mastery (Bladow & Ladino, 2018). The weird, as a global genre, has become the aesthetic laboratory of new materialism precisely because it suspends the explanatory sovereignty of the human observer.

Anna Tsing's (2015) ethnography of the matsutake mushroom—flourishing in capitalist ruins, binding Japanese markets, Southeast Asian pickers, and Oregon forests—has furnished world literature and criticism alike with a template for narrating “contaminated diversity”: survival as collaborative, cross-species, and unheroic. Haraway's (2016) injunction to “stay with the trouble” and “make kin” beyond genealogy resonates through a transnational corpus: Rita Indiana's Caribbean climate fiction *Tentacle* splices Yoruba-derived Santería cosmology, queer transition, and marine ecological collapse, making the sacred anemone the pivot of planetary rescue; Olga Tokarczuk's *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* channels narrative authority through an aging astrologer who reads animal deaths as insurrection, unsettling the reader's confidence in which deaths count as grievable.

Vermeulen (2020) argues that the Anthropocene functions less as a theme than as a transformation of literature's operating conditions: inherited forms—lyric address, elegy, the bildungsroman—are being retooled to metabolize deep time, extinction, and toxicity. Affect theory explains why this retooling matters politically: information about ecological collapse is abundant, but action requires the mobilization of feeling, and narrative remains culture's most powerful affective technology (Weik von Mossner, 2017). The materiality of these fictions is therefore double. They represent agentic matter, and they are agentic matter—printed, circulated, translated objects that reorganize the sensoria of readers across the world-system. In this light, contemporary world literature does not simply depict posthuman consciousness; it manufactures it, one recalibrated reader at a time. Genre itself becomes newly significant in this light. The migration of literary prestige toward the weird, the speculative, and the fabular across languages and markets indicates that realism's contract—stable selves in a passive world—no longer matches planetary experience (Ghosh, 2016; Vermeulen, 2020). Translation, meanwhile, functions as a material-affective circuit of its own: Tokarczuk, Indiana, and their peers reach world audiences through translational labor that carries situated cosmologies across linguistic borders, testing whether affects of kinship with the nonhuman are themselves translatable. World literature's posthuman turn is therefore inseparable from its infrastructures—prizes, presses, translators—reminding criticism that the circulation of consciousness is always also the circulation of books, money, and institutional attention.

7. Planetary Relationality and Decolonial Epistemologies

The horizon toward which these archives converge is planetary relationality: a mode of belonging in which the earth is neither backdrop nor resource but the encompassing condition of all subjectivity. Yet the planetary must be carefully distinguished from the global. The global is the space of capital, logistics, and homogenization; the planetary, by contrast, names an alterity that precedes and exceeds human systems. Decolonial thought is what prevents planetary discourse from becoming another universalism. Yusoff (2018) shows that the very stratigraphic language of the Anthropocene—origins, golden spikes, the figure of a unified anthropos—erases the fact that colonialism and slavery were geological projects, transmuting persons into property and land into extraction. To speak of “our” planetary crisis without this genealogy is to repeat the erasure.

Indigenous epistemologies model relationality as governance rather than metaphor. Whyte (2018) demonstrates that Anishinaabe and other Indigenous frameworks treat climate change as intensified colonialism—Indigenous peoples already inhabit their ancestors' dystopia—and that Indigenous science fiction narrates futures from within ongoing survivance rather than anticipatory apocalypse. Literary texts grounded in such epistemologies—from Māori and First Nations fiction to the legal personhood granted rivers in Aotearoa and India—enact what Mignolo and Walsh (2018) call epistemic delinking: knowledge produced otherwise, in which kinship with mountains and waters is neither primitivism nor postmodern novelty but continuous jurisprudence.

Literary form registers the planetary through experiments in scale and perspective. DeLoughrey (2019) reads allegory as the genre of the Anthropocene precisely because it can bind the particle to the planet—a Pacific atoll to nuclear modernity, a drowned island to the world-system. Ghosh's (2016, 2021) itineraries of nutmeg, opium, and displaced persons perform a similar cartography, tracing how planetary flows were colonially engineered. Caracciolo (2021) shows how narrative can render nonlinearity, feedback, and emergence—the signatures of earth systems—through multiperspectival and looping forms. What emerges across these interventions is a redefinition of relationality itself: not the liberal tolerance of pre-constituted individuals, but the ontological priority of relation, from which selves, species, and territories precipitate. Planetary relationality, decolonially conceived, therefore names both an ethics—responsibility distributed across radically unequal histories—and a poetics: the ongoing invention of forms in which the earth can appear as subject rather than scene.

Two cautions attend this horizon. First, planetary relationality must not flatten difference into a mystical oneness; relation, as Indigenous jurisprudence insists, is specific, obligated, and often treaty-like, binding particular peoples to particular waters and lands (Whyte, 2018). Second, the literary planetary must resist becoming a consolatory aesthetic—sublime images of entanglement that substitute for the redistribution of resources and risk. Mbembe's (2019) necropolitical lens keeps this danger in view: as seas rise, borders harden, and exposure to death is again apportioned along colonial lines. A decolonially disciplined planetary poetics therefore keeps two ledgers open at once—the ecological ledger of species and systems, and the historical ledger of dispossession—and treats any narrative that closes one to balance the other as incomplete.

8. Conclusion

This paper has argued that the movement from humanism to posthuman consciousness in contemporary literature is best understood not as a single rupture but as five braided reconfigurations. Subjectivity is being rewritten as relational and manufactured, as British fictions of the artificial person reveal. Cognition is being redistributed across bodies, forests, and machines, as the American novel of more-than-human mind demonstrates. Ethics is being renegotiated at the boundaries of personhood, where postcolonial narrators indict the necropolitical orders that excluded them from the human. Materiality is being re-animated, as world literature's weird and entangled forms register the agency of matter within and beyond the body. And relationality is being scaled to the planet, under the indispensable correction of decolonial and Indigenous epistemologies that refuse any innocent “we.”

Methodologically, the paper has sought to demonstrate the necessity of interdisciplinary triangulation. Cognitive literary studies explains how narrative reshapes minds; critical posthumanism explains why those minds must be reconceived beyond the anthropos; narrative ethics specifies the techniques through which texts solicit responsibility; affect theory accounts for the embodied transmission that converts knowledge into care; and decolonial epistemologies ensure that the posthuman does not become the latest export of the Global North's self-critique. Each framework corrects the blind spots of the others; together they constitute a critical apparatus adequate to literatures that are themselves already interdisciplinary, splicing botany and myth, algorithm and ancestor.

The implications extend beyond the seminar room. If Hayles (2017) is right that we live inside planetary cognitive assemblages, and if Ghosh (2021) is right that the crisis of those assemblages is colonial in origin, then literary studies acquires a distinctive vocation: to curate, interpret, and help create the narratives through which a pluriversal, post-anthropocentric, and just planetary consciousness might be composed. Literature will not cool the atmosphere or restore extinct species. But it remains the most refined instrument human cultures possess for rehearsing other ways of being a self, knowing a world, and owing a debt. From Klara's yard to Area X, from Animal's Khaupur to the rooted time of the chestnut, contemporary fiction is already conducting that rehearsal. The task of a decolonial posthuman literary studies is to read it with commensurate imagination.

Future research should extend this framework in at least three directions: empirically, through reader-response and cognitive-empirical study of whether posthuman fictions measurably shift attitudes toward nonhuman others; comparatively, by incorporating literatures beyond English—Sinophone, Arabophone, Indigenous-language—where the human/nonhuman boundary is drawn along different cosmological seams; and pedagogically, by designing curricula in which cognitive, posthumanist, ethical, affective, and decolonial lenses are taught as an integrated practice rather than sequential units. The transition from humanism to posthuman consciousness is not complete, and literature alone will not complete it. But in its capacity to let readers think as another, feel across the species line, and remember what universalism forgot, literary narrative remains indispensable to whatever humanity comes next.

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