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The Future in a Dream: Langston Hughes as a Proto-Afrofuturist Voice

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Abstract
This paper analyses the poetry of Langston Hughes through the lens of Afrofuturism, arguing that his sustained vision of hope and racial transformation positions him as a proto-Afrofuturist voice. Long before the emergence of modern Afrofuturism in the late twentieth century, Hughes employed poetic imagination to envision liberated Black futures where equality, creativity, and humanity flourish beyond racial boundaries. Poems such as "I Dream a World," "Let America Be America Again," and "Harlem" reimagine time and possibility, transforming dreams of freedom into tools of cultural resistance. By analysing themes of aspiration, identity, and futurity, the paper demonstrates that Hughes's mode of "dreaming" operates as a form of speculative resistance, envisioning alternative social realities yet to emerge. Engaging critical insights from Gregory J. Hampton, Ytasha Womack, and Kodwo Eshun, the study positions Hughes as a formative figure whose imaginative vision links Harlem Renaissance ideals with the conceptual framework of later Afrofuturist thought. In doing so, it contends that Hughes's poetry not only reflects the historical moment of its creation but also anticipates the creative momentum of Afrofuturism, converting the dream of equality into a lasting emblem of Black futurity.

Key words: Langston Hughes; Afrofuturism; Proto-Afrofuturism; Black Futurity; Dream and Imagination; Creative Resistance.

1.Introduction

Langston Hughes, one of the most influential poets of the Harlem Renaissance, is often seen as a powerful voice expressing Black aspiration, equality, and resistance. His poetry gives shape to the struggles, hopes, and dreams of African Americans,

turning individual longing into a shared vision. Through his repeated focus on dreams, Hughes not only records the realities of racial oppression but also imagines a future built on justice and freedom. His work looks ahead to a better world, showing a forward-looking imagination that reaches beyond his own time. This futuristic quality connects Hughes's poetry to what is now known as Afrofuturism—a cultural and intellectual movement that links Black identity with imagination, creativity, and visions of liberated futures.

Afrofuturism, as described by scholars such as Ytasha Womack and Alondra Nelson, combines African diasporic history with elements of science fiction, speculative thinking, and artistic innovation. Womack defines Afrofuturism as "an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation," emphasizing the right of Black people to see themselves in the future. Nelson similarly explains Afrofuturism as a way of using imaginative thought to question and reshape Black identity. At its core, Afrofuturism challenges historical narratives that have pushed Black people out of futuristic and technological worlds. It seeks to rewrite these narratives by blending past experiences with hopes for a new, freer future.

Although Hughes lived long before the term Afrofuturism was created in the 1990s, his poetry anticipates many of its key ideas. His dream-focused poems—such as "Harlem (What Happens to a Dream Deferred?)," "I Dream a World," and "Let America Be America Again"—show his belief in the power of imagination to drive change. For Hughes, dreams are not simple wishes; they are creative and political acts that picture a world where racial equality and human dignity are fully achieved. This act of imagining a just future makes Hughes a proto-Afrofuturist—that is, an early figure whose work expresses Afrofuturist ideas before the movement was formally named. His poetic vision of an inclusive and equal society aligns closely with Afrofuturism's focus on imagining freedom through art and creativity.

The term proto-Afrofuturism refers to early expressions of Black futurity—works that may not use overt science fiction or technology but still contain the imaginative and political energy that later shaped the Afrofuturist movement. Writers like W.E.B. Du Bois in "The Comet" (1920) and George Schuyler in Black No More (1931) are often seen as proto-Afrofuturists because they used speculative ideas to explore race and modern life. Hughes's poetry belongs to this tradition. His steady focus on

dreams, hope, and transformation demonstrates a speculative vision that reimagines both the present condition and the future possibilities of Black life.

This paper argues that Hughes's dream-centered poetry functions as an early form of Afrofuturist thought. By using aspiration as a response to despair, Hughes builds a visionary framework that challenges historical barriers and points toward future liberation. His poems turn the collective Black dream into a pathway for freedom, anticipating Afrofuturism's central aim: to imagine new Black futures through creativity, imagination, and belief in human potential.

2. Theoretical Framework: Afrofuturism and Black Futurity

Afrofuturism is a cultural and intellectual framework that uses imagination and speculative thinking to rethink the place of Black people in history, technology, and the future. First defined in the 1990s by Mark Dery and later developed by scholars such as Ytasha Womack, Alondra Nelson, and Kodwo Eshun, Afrofuturism blends science fiction, fantasy, and African diasporic culture. It challenges the historical exclusion of Black voices from mainstream ideas about modernity and futurity. At its core, Afrofuturism treats the act of imagining new worlds as a political form of resistance.

Womack describes Afrofuturism as "an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation," showing that it is not only a science-fiction genre but also a cultural practice linked to survival and freedom. Nelson adds that Afrofuturism uses speculative narratives and techno culture to explore issues affecting the African diaspora. Together, their work highlights Afrofuturism as a way of rewriting history and imagining liberated futures through art, literature, and performance.

Afrofuturism is not limited to images of space travel or advanced machines; such symbols function as metaphors for Black creative freedom. Kodwo Eshun describes it as a "counter-futurism" that challenges Eurocentric ideas of progress and reclaims the idea of the future for Black expression. In this way, Afrofuturism revisits the past, critiques the present, and imagines futures in which Black life is central.

Gregory J. Hampton expands this framework by linking Afrofuturism to African American literature. He argues that Black speculative writing reshapes ideas

of identity, embodiment, and agency, offering new ways to understand what it means to be human under racial and technological pressures. His work positions Afrofuturism as both a creative movement and a critical method.

This theoretical background helps us read Langston Hughes's dream-centered poetry as an early form of Afrofuturist thinking. Although Hughes did not use science-fiction imagery, his dreams of freedom, justice, and transformation reflect Afrofuturism's emphasis on imagining alternative futures. Poems like "I Dream a World" project moral and social renewal, revealing a speculative vision that predates the formal language of Afrofuturism.

Hughes's work can therefore be seen as proto-Afrofuturism—an early expression of Black futurity rooted in cultural hope and imaginative resistance. His dreams of equality and collective healing anticipate Afrofuturism's larger goal of envisioning new Black futures. Through this lens, Hughes becomes an important literary foundation for Afrofuturist thought.

3. Langston Hughes's Poetic Vision as Proto-Afrofuturism

The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s was a period of profound cultural rebirth for African Americans. It marked a time when Black writers, artists, and musicians sought to redefine the meaning of Black identity and creativity in a world that had long suppressed both. Harlem became a symbolic and literal space of artistic revolution—a "New Negro" consciousness that celebrated racial pride, heritage, and creative expression. Within this movement, Langston Hughes emerged as one of its most powerful voices. Through poetry, essays, and performance, Hughes envisioned a world in which Black art could not only reflect reality but also transform it. His commitment to expressing the everyday struggles and dreams of his people represented an act of radical imagination—a form of cultural futurism before the language of Afrofuturism existed.

Hughes's artistic philosophy centered on dreaming and hope as revolutionary forces. To him, art was not an escape from oppression but a means of imagining beyond it. In his landmark 1926 essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," Hughes declares that the true artist must embrace his or her Black identity rather than aspire to whiteness. He critiques young Black poets who wish to be seen as "just a poet" rather than a "Negro poet," arguing that such a desire reflects internalized racism and cultural erasure. For Hughes, authentic art comes from accepting the

beauty of one's own culture, community, and voice. This essay, often read as a manifesto of the Harlem Renaissance, lays the philosophical foundation for what might be called proto-Afrofuturism: a belief that Black self-expression can remake the world by transforming how people imagine Blackness itself.

Hughes's emphasis on creative imagination as resistance mirrors the core of Afrofuturist thought. Afrofuturism, as defined by Ytasha Womack, is not just about futuristic technology or science fiction—it is about reclaiming the right to dream and to invent narratives that place Black people at the center of the future. Similarly, Hughes's poetry insists that dreaming is a political act. His famous lines in "Harlem"—"What happens to a dream deferred? / Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?"—expose the tension between hope and despair in a racist society. Yet, implicit in the poem's haunting questions is the belief that deferred dreams cannot die; they remain latent forces of change, waiting to "explode." This explosive metaphor is not only psychological or social—it is futurist. It anticipates the Afrofuturist principle that suppressed imagination, once unleashed, has the power to rewrite history.

In "I Dream a World," Hughes's vision becomes explicitly utopian. The poem imagines a time "where love will bless the earth / and peace its paths adorn." This is not simply a sentimental hope for harmony; it is a radical projection of moral and spiritual transformation. The poem imagines a world governed by justice and compassion—a world yet to come. Such visionary dreaming is central to Afrofuturism's project of reimagining the future through art and cultural imagination. While later Afrofuturist writers like Octavia Butler and Samuel R. Delany would employ science fiction to depict alternative societies, Hughes's medium was lyric poetry. His speculative act lies in imagining a reformed humanity grounded in love and equality—a humanist utopia rooted in Black experience.

Moreover, Hughes's poems like "Let America Be America Again" reconfigure the American Dream through a distinctly Black futurist lens. The poem begins with disappointment—"America never was America to me"—but gradually transforms this despair into a prophetic demand for renewal. Hughes reclaims the American ideal as an unfinished project, calling for a future where the dream of democracy is realized for all. This forward-looking vision, grounded in moral and collective aspiration, aligns with Afrofuturism's effort to imagine futures where Black life thrives in freedom and dignity. His refrain "Let America be the dream the

dreamers dreamed" becomes both a lament and a speculative challenge, urging readers to imagine the nation anew.

Hughes's focus on equality, self-expression, and the dignity of the Black soul also anticipates Afrofuturism's larger concern with liberation and transformation. Just as Afrofuturism reclaims the narrative of the future from exclusion, Hughes reclaims the narrative of the present from invisibility. His artistic project was to give voice to those marginalized by history, to depict their lives as meaningful and worthy of celebration. This insistence on representation—on the presence of the Black body, voice, and spirit within the American story—constitutes a powerful early form of what Gregory J. Hampton later describes as redefining Black subjectivity through speculative creativity. Hughes did not need to imagine outer space; he imagined inner space—the moral, cultural, and emotional dimensions of freedom that precede any technological progress.

Furthermore, Hughes's use of jazz as a poetic structure embodies a kind of technological and cultural futurism. Jazz, as the sound of modernity and improvisation, symbolizes constant evolution and innovation—qualities that Afrofuturism celebrates. In blending the rhythms of jazz with the cadences of poetry, Hughes created a modern, distinctly African American art form that looked toward the future. This synthesis of traditional culture with new creative possibilities reflects the Afrofuturist impulse to merge heritage with innovation.

Thus, Hughes's poetic vision stands as a bridge between the Harlem Renaissance and Afrofuturism. His dreams were not confined to his historical moment; they reached forward, anticipating later movements that sought to reimagine Black existence beyond oppression. In redefining art as a vehicle for hope and transformation, Hughes established a legacy that Afrofuturist artists continue to build upon. His dream-centered philosophy reaffirms that the future can be shaped by imagination—and that the Black artist's greatest tool of resistance is the courage to dream of a world not yet born.

4. Dreams as Political and Spiritual Resistance in Selected Poems

Langston Hughes's poetry consistently transforms the language of dreams into a tool of resistance and reimagination. For Hughes, dreaming is not mere fantasy or escapism but a radical act—a means of visualizing a world beyond the boundaries

of racial inequality. His poems articulate a profound belief that change begins in the imagination and that envisioning freedom is itself an act of freedom. This vision aligns with the core principles of Afrofuturism, which employs creativity and speculative imagination to resist historical erasure and to construct new futures for Black existence. Hughes's poems such as "Harlem," "I Dream a World," and "Let America Be America Again" are exemplary of this proto-Afrofuturist consciousness, where dreaming becomes both a political weapon and a spiritual resource.

I. "Harlem": The Deferred Dream and the Seeds of Revolution

Hughes's poem "Harlem (What Happens to a Dream Deferred?)" stands as one of his most incisive meditations on the tension between deferred aspiration and social transformation. The poem opens with a question—"What happens to a dream deferred?"—that immediately universalizes the experience of unfulfilled hope while grounding it in the specific context of African American life. Each subsequent image—drying up "like a raisin in the sun," festering "like a sore," or exploding—embodies both decay and potential energy. The dream deferred becomes a metaphor for suppressed humanity and postponed justice, but also for the unstoppable energy of a people whose desire for freedom cannot be permanently denied.

The final line—"Or does it explode?"—shifts the tone from quiet despair to revolutionary potential. This "explosion" can be read as the moment when suppressed imagination erupts into social change. It anticipates the logic of Afrofuturism, which interprets Black imagination as a form of power capable of reshaping history. As Gregory J. Hampton notes, speculative imagination "creates spaces where the Black subject is reconstructed as powerful and self-defining." Hughes's "explosion" is precisely that—an imaginative rebellion that refuses stagnation. The poem's compressed, rhythmic form mirrors the tension between containment and release, between the silenced dream and its inevitable resurgence. In this sense, "Harlem" transforms the deferred dream into a futurist prophecy: what is deferred in the present will inevitably manifest in the future, potentially through creative or revolutionary means.

II. "I Dream a World": Utopian Vision and Moral Imagination

If "Harlem" examines the pain of unrealized dreams, "I Dream a World" envisions their fulfillment. The poem's structure resembles a prayer or a manifesto, expressing a collective hope rather than a personal wish:

"I dream a world where man
No other man will scorn,
Where love will bless the earth
And peace its paths adorn."

Here, Hughes moves beyond social critique into the realm of utopian speculation—a key feature of Afrofuturist expression. His imagined world is one of moral and spiritual renewal, grounded in universal equality but clearly shaped by the racial injustices of his time. The simplicity of the language masks the radicalism of its vision: a world free of scorn, hate, and exploitation represents a total inversion of the existing order. In envisioning such a transformation, Hughes performs what Alondra Nelson identifies as Afrofuturism's primary function— "using speculative narratives to rewrite racialized histories and create liberating possibilities."

The repetition of "I dream" throughout the poem creates a rhythmic incantation, transforming the act of dreaming into a kind of creative ritual. This repetitive structure enacts persistence, echoing the Afrofuturist belief that imagining a better future must be a continuous, collective process. By refusing to let go of the dream, Hughes affirms faith in humanity's moral progress. His vision aligns with Ytasha Womack's definition of Afrofuturism as "the intersection of imagination and liberation," where dreaming itself becomes a tool for social transformation. In this poem, the dreamer is not a passive observer but an active creator of a future reality—a concept central to Afrofuturist aesthetics.

III. "Let America Be America Again": Reclaiming the Dream of Freedom

In "Let America Be America Again," Hughes extends his dream motif to the national scale, confronting the contradictions of American democracy. The poem opens with a plea:

"Let America be America again.
Let it be the dream it used to be."

However, this nostalgic invocation quickly turns into a critique. The speaker declares, "America never was America to me," exposing the hypocrisy of a nation built on freedom yet sustained by racial and economic injustice. The poem alternates between hope and disillusionment, ultimately transforming both into a prophetic demand for collective renewal. Hughes's redefinition of the "American Dream"

parallels Afrofuturism's redefinition of the "future": both seek to reclaim narratives that have historically excluded Black voices.

The poem's insistence on "the dream the dreamers dreamed" underscores Hughes's belief that the nation's founding ideals remain incomplete and must be reimagined through inclusion. His call to action—"O, let America be America again— / The land that never has been yet— / And yet must be"—directly links imagination to transformation. The phrase "never has been yet" implies futurity; it recognizes that justice is not a static concept but a continuous process of becoming. In this way, the poem embodies Afrofuturist temporality, where past injustices and future hopes coexist in the same imaginative space. Hughes's America is a speculative construct, a moral future projected through poetic vision.

IV. Dreaming as Spiritual and Political Resistance

Across these poems, Hughes's recurring motif of the dream serves as both a spiritual refuge and a political strategy. Spiritually, dreaming represents faith in the ultimate triumph of good over evil—a deeply human hope that transcends suffering. Politically, dreaming represents defiance, a refusal to accept social reality as fixed. This duality echoes the Afrofuturist belief that imagination is the foundation of liberation. Just as Afrofuturist artists like Octavia Butler and Sun Ra use speculative forms to resist historical erasure, Hughes uses lyrical simplicity to project moral and emotional futures. His work demonstrates that the act of dreaming is itself revolutionary—it sustains the will to survive and the vision to rebuild.

Hughes's dream-centered poetry thus becomes a precursor to Afrofuturism's creative politics. His imagined worlds—whether the peaceful earth of "I Dream a World" or the renewed democracy of "Let America Be America Again"—are not fantasies detached from reality, but blueprints for transformation. In transforming imagination into a weapon of hope, Hughes reclaims the right of Black people to define their own futures. His work stands as a bridge between the Harlem Renaissance's cultural awakening and Afrofuturism's futuristic liberation, proving that every dream, however deferred, contains within it the possibility of a new world.

5. Hughes and the Foundations of Afrofuturist Thought

Langston Hughes's vision of freedom and equality does not belong solely to the Harlem Renaissance; it extends into the intellectual and creative territory that later

generations would recognize as Afrofuturism. Though he never wrote science fiction or used technological imagery, Hughes's imaginative resistance—his use of dreams, hope, and moral imagination as tools of liberation—anticipates the strategies later employed by Afrofuturist writers and artists such as Octavia Butler, Sun Ra, and Samuel R. Delany. Each of these figures used creative expression to reimagine Black identity beyond the boundaries of race, history, and social limitation. Hughes's poetic dreaming thus becomes an essential foundation upon which Afrofuturist thought would later build: a belief in art as a medium for reclaiming Black subjectivity and constructing new realities.

Octavia Butler's science fiction novels, such as Kindred and Parable of the Sower, transport readers to alternative worlds where race, gender, and power are redefined. Butler's speculative settings—futuristic yet deeply human—mirror Hughes's own method of reconfiguring reality through poetic imagination. Where Butler uses science fiction to critique social inequality and to explore survival, Hughes uses poetry to propose moral transformation and collective hope. Both artists engage in what can be called creative futurism, a way of using narrative and vision to challenge oppression and to assert agency over the future. Butler's heroines who rebuild communities after catastrophe echo Hughes's insistence that "a dream deferred" will still find ways to rise. His poetic dreams serve as the emotional and philosophical precursor to Butler's fictional worlds of resistance and regeneration.

Similarly, Sun Ra, the avant-garde jazz musician and cosmic philosopher, projected his Afrofuturist vision through music and performance. In his cosmic mythos, Black people are "children of the sun" destined for spiritual and cosmic liberation. Though Sun Ra's art uses the imagery of outer space, his purpose was the same as Hughes's: to imagine a world where Black existence transcends earthly oppression. In Hughes's poem "Dream Variations," the dreamer longs "to rest at cool evening / Beneath a tall tree," envisioning peace and self-harmony; in Sun Ra's universe, this dream expands into interplanetary form—a space of infinite freedom. Both figures transform imagination into a sanctuary for the soul. The difference is one of medium, not message: Hughes's lyrical simplicity becomes the ground note of Sun Ra's cosmic symphony. Both artists affirm that the Black imagination is a site of liberation, not limitation.

Samuel R. Delany, one of the most important Black science fiction writers of the twentieth century, further illustrates the continuity of this tradition. His speculative works explore language, desire, and identity in futuristic settings that dismantle fixed categories of race and humanity. In doing so, Delany embodies what Hughes began through poetry—the insistence that Black identity is fluid, dynamic, and capable of imagining new social orders. Delany's redefinition of human experience in novels like Nova or Babel-17 corresponds to Hughes's poetic redefinition of America in "Let America Be America Again". Both challenge the same philosophical question: Who gets to define humanity and its future? Hughes asks this question through moral vision; Delany answers it through speculative narrative.

Gregory J. Hampton's work on Black speculative fiction provides a useful theoretical bridge between Hughes and these later Afrofuturists. Hampton argues that speculative literature "challenges the limits of race and humanity" by creating worlds where Black subjectivity is not constrained by history or biology. This reconfiguration of being—what Hampton calls the re-imagining of "Black subjectivity"—can already be traced in Hughes's dream-centered poems. In "I Dream a World," for example, Hughes imagines a global community without racial hatred or greed, one that restores humanity's moral equilibrium. Through such visions, Hughes transcends the categories imposed upon Black life in his time. His dreams are not passive hopes but active constructions of alternative futures, much like the speculative worlds Hampton describes.

Thus, Hughes's poetry can be understood as a proto-speculative literature, one that performs through metaphor what later Afrofuturist fiction would perform through narrative world-building. His art defies both temporal and racial boundaries, insisting that the Black soul's capacity to imagine is itself revolutionary. When Hughes dreams of a just world that "never has been yet—and yet must be," he performs the central act of Afrofuturism: to dream forward, to claim the future as a site of Black possibility.

In this sense, Hughes is not merely an influence on later Afrofuturist artists but one of their earliest philosophical ancestors. His poetic insistence that dreams survive every deferral and transcend every boundary prefigures the speculative courage of Butler, the cosmic mysticism of Sun Ra, and the linguistic experimentation

of Delany. Together, they form a lineage of imaginative resistance—one that begins in Hughes's humble dream and unfolds into the vast universe of Afrofuturist thought.

5. Conclusion: Hughes's Legacy and the Continuum of Black Futurity

Langston Hughes's poetry occupies a pivotal position in the historical continuum of Black artistic imagination—from the Harlem Renaissance's cultural awakening to the speculative horizons of Afrofuturism. His persistent use of dreams, hope, and imagination as instruments of liberation situates him not only as a voice of his generation but also as a visionary whose thought transcends time. The dream, for Hughes, is both a personal yearning and a collective strategy—a way for the Black community to reimagine its place in the world and to claim the moral right to shape its own destiny. In this sense, his poetic philosophy anticipates the core aims of Afrofuturism: to rewrite Black experience, reclaim agency over history, and envision liberating futures.

The Harlem Renaissance, within which Hughes's artistic voice matured, was itself a forward-looking movement. It sought to recover and celebrate Black creativity while challenging the limits imposed by racism and economic oppression. Writers, artists, and musicians of that era constructed new visions of selfhood that projected beyond the boundaries of segregation and colonial prejudice. Hughes extended this mission by linking cultural expression to moral and political transformation. His poems invited readers to dream—not in the sense of escaping reality, but in imagining alternatives to it. As he declared in his essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," the true duty of the Black artist was to embrace his racial identity with pride and to use art as a means of self-definition and empowerment. That call to artistic self-determination is precisely what later Afrofuturist thinkers echo when they reclaim science fiction, technology, and speculative art as modes of Black storytelling. Hughes's dreams therefore operate on two intertwined levels: historical reclamation and futuristic projection. Historically, he reclaims the right to narrate Black life with dignity and complexity; futuristically, he projects a vision of what Black existence could become once freed from oppression. His dream of America in "Let America Be America Again" is not a nostalgic desire for a lost past, but an aspirational claim for a future that "never has been yet—and yet must be." Similarly, the utopian hope of "I Dream a World" articulates an ethical imagination in which equality and peace are not mere ideals but necessary conditions of humanity. These visions resonate with

Afrofuturism's project of imagining worlds where Black lives are not peripheral, but central, empowered, and self-defining.

Moreover, Hughes's spiritual dimension—the belief in the indestructibility of the dream—provides a moral foundation for later Black speculative traditions. His poetry suggests that survival itself is a form of futurity: to endure, to continue to dream, is to resist erasure. Afrofuturism inherits this moral stance by transforming survival into transcendence, merging technology with spirituality, and reconstructing the Black past to secure the future. Hughes may not have employed the imagery of spaceships or advanced technology, yet his imaginative faith in rebirth, progress, and moral renewal embodies the same visionary energy. His work therefore represents an early humanist form of Afrofuturism, rooted not in machines but in the creative spirit. In today's context, as writers, filmmakers, and musicians continue to explore Afrofuturist ideas—from Octavia Butler's Parable of the Sower to Janelle Monáe's concept albums—Hughes's legacy remains foundational. His insistence that "a dream deferred" can still explode into transformation reminds us that imagination is both an archive of pain and a seed of possibility. Through his poetic lens, the dream becomes the ultimate site of resistance and creation—a space where the Black soul can envision, rebuild, and transcend.

Langston Hughes, then, stands as a bridge between the Harlem Renaissance's recovery of identity and Afrofuturism's projection of Black futurity. His dream-centered poetry embodies the enduring truth that to imagine is to begin to liberate. By turning aspiration into art, he transformed hope into history and dream into destiny—proving that the Black future first took shape in the imagination of a poet.

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